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SRI RAMAKRISHNA
AND
SPIRITUAL RENAISSANCE

Swami Nirvedananda

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SRI RAMAKRISHNA
AND
SPIRITUAL RENAISSANCE

By

SWAMI NIRVEDANANDA

SECRETARY, THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION STUDENTS' HOME,
CALCUTTA

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION
INSTITUTE OF CULTURE
CALCUTTA
1940

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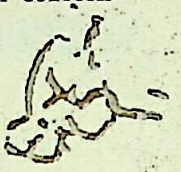

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Cultural Heritage of India, published in commemoration of the first Birth Centenary of Sri Ramakrishna, contains in its second volume a fairly long and well-written article entitled Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance. This article is much in demand. Many among the interested public have communicated to us their eagerness for getting it in the form of a separate book. This has led us to reprint it here from the original after necessary revision by the author. We hope that this book will serve the purpose for which it has been brought out and also prove useful to a wider range of readers in India and abroad by acquainting them with the relevant details of a momentous spiritual movement destined to work for universal good.

Calcutta,
December 25, 1940.

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A CORRECTION

Page 12, line 22—read "New York" for "England."

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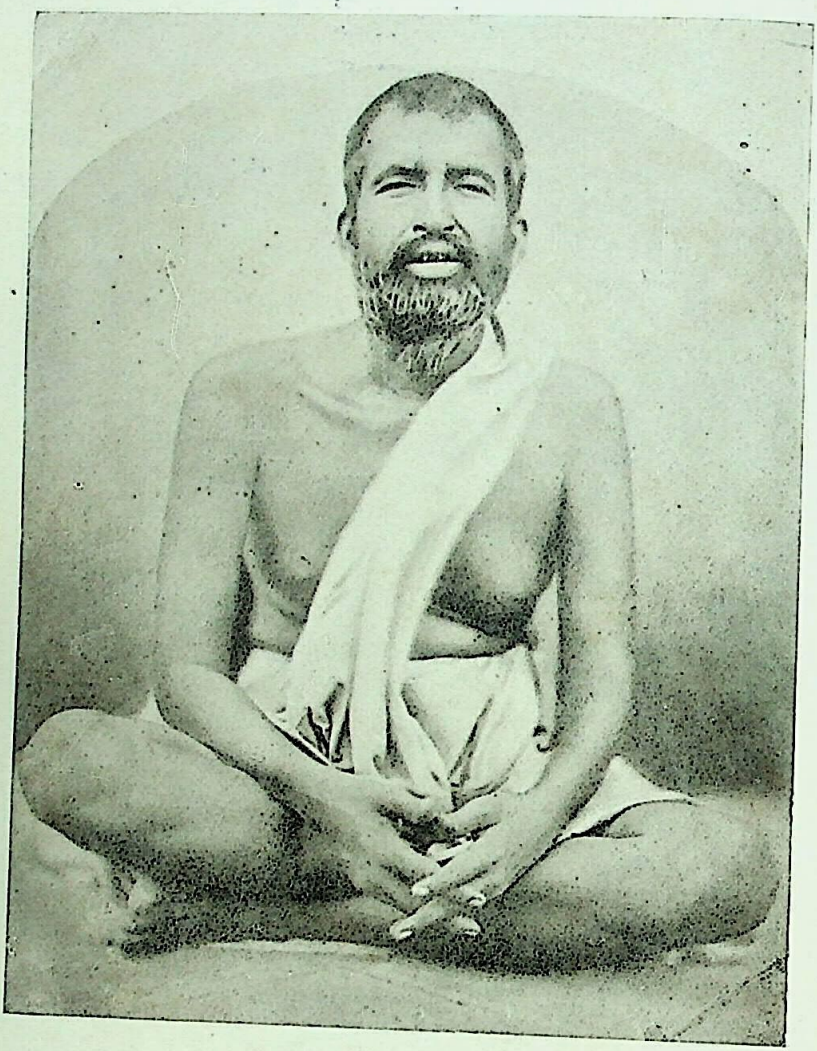

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SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND SPIRITUAL RENAISSANCE

PRESENTE

I

March of Events

THE EBB-TIDE OF INDIAN CULTURE

In *The Cultural Heritage of India* published in commemoration of the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna we get a comprehensive view of the progressive career of Indian culture and civilization as seen through the vista of ages. Its pages give us a glimpse of the spiritual yearnings of the young Aryan soul of the Vedic times, the inspired outpourings of the Upanishadic seers, the moral fervour of the Bauddhas and Jains, the ideal life-sketches of the immortal Epics, the popular spiritual inspiration of the Purāṇas, the subtle philosophical spirit of the Darśanas, the immaculate purity and devotional ardour of sages and saints, and the torrents of reforming zeal behind epoch-making religious movements. This wide range of splendid achievements of ancient and medieval India, this brilliant chapter of cultural progress carried on through scores of centuries, does undoubtedly fill one's mind with admiration and reverence for the wonderful genius of the ancestors of the Hindu race.

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The records of the brilliant past, however, urge us to enquire into the subsequent fate of the historic march of Indian culture. Has this chapter of cultural progress closed in the wake of the modern era? Has India after the middle ages been reduced to a crumbling mummy decked with the fineries of a glittering antiquity? Has she absolutely lost the spark of life, the vitalizing power, that is capable of evolving a mightier and more glorious future? Such might be the pertinent questions of an impartial observer of Indian affairs from the close of the eighteenth century right up to the middle of the nineteenth.

During this period India had been wading through a bewildering welter of cultural ideals. Politically overthrown by the British, she had been fast coming under the sway of an exotic civilization. Complete break-down of her political power shook her faith in the potency of her age-old culture. Her brow was branded indelibly with an ignominious mark of inferiority, and she stood stupefied before the apparently superior civilization of the mighty victors. A surging freshet of European ideas and ideals that rushed in the train of British supremacy was all that was necessary to sweep her off her old cultural moorings.

The process of disruption of her inner life was accelerated by the trend of education under the new regime, which tended to turn out men who were to be Indian in blood but English in taste and intellectual outlook. In this strange academic *milieu*, young minds

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began to swallow queer cultural shibboleths, such as, that India had no culture worth the name, that her entire past was a foolish quest after false ideals, that if she wanted seriously to live, she would have to remould herself thoroughly in the lathe of European civilization. No wonder these incantations lulled the self-consciousness of the Indians to sleep.

While the Indians were being overpowered in this way by a strong spell of cultural hypnotism, certain sinister forces allied to the new system of education began to work vigorously to lead them astray from their indigenous ideals.

A tidal wave of atheism swept over the land through the medium of the English language. The English literature of the period was charged with the explosive thoughts of rank atheists and the materialistic findings of nineteenth century scientists. These nihilistic thoughts stormed the citadel of Hindu faith. Hundreds of intellectuals readily surrendered and openly avowed the vassalage of materialistic realism. They commenced to glory and revel in atheistic thoughts and ways of life. The shock was too severe for the Hindu society to bear. Eventually it tottered and began to crumble.

Those who survived this shock had yet another disruptive influence to reckon with. The introduction of English education in India became closely associated with Christian evangelism. Christian missionaries often discharged the dual function of teaching English and preaching the Gospels. As educationists,

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their brilliance was beyond question, but as preachers, their outlook was unfortunately very narrow. Their stubborn faith in the dogmas of the Christian church together with their religious zeal for working out the salvation of mankind made them absolutely uncompromising and vitriolic critics of all alien creeds. Far from appreciating anything good and salutary in other religions, they poured out, with perfect nonchalance, vials of hatred upon all non-Christian faiths, and uttered anathema upon all heathens.

As ill luck would have it, their position lent a glamour to their preaching. They appeared as educationists, journalists and social workers, ranked as philanthropists and posed as scions of the ruling race. Besides, they had winning manners, and at least some of them bore a genuine love for the people of this land. These made their influence all the more formidable. At the portals of educational institutions stood these redoubtable champions of Christianity, and they gently led their intellectual pupils to step out of academic distinction on to religious conversion. The proselytizing spirit of these pious zealots began to play havoc within the Hindu fold.

Thus the bane of political serfdom together with the attendant evils of the new system of education sat upon the Hindu society like a horrible nightmare. Generations of quixotic cultural hybrids raised their heads like mushrooms all over the country. They were neither Indian nor English in their taste, temperament, intellectual outlook and ways of life. They

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had scarcely any faith in their forefathers and their hoary culture, and they deemed it wise to set a premium on aping, though imperfectly, the English, who had appeared in the rôle of their political masters and intellectual guides.

An impartial observer of this period, therefore, would naturally find nothing but a complete cultural chaos, particularly within the zone of English education. The spiritual foundation of the Hindu social structure was terribly shocked, and perhaps it was going to be blown off altogether. The cultural life of the Hindus came to the perilous verge of extinction. India staggered and a crash seemed inevitable.

REFORM MOVEMENTS

But this was not to be. India escaped the impending crash almost by a miracle. Something happened beneath the surface of things—perhaps the Divine Will flashed—and India began to show unmistakable signs of a spiritual awakening. Towards the second quarter of the nineteenth century, while India was about to lose herself completely in the cultural welter, suddenly she found her feet and wanted seriously to assert herself. The vitality that had been lying dormant deep in the heart of the nation under a spell of enchantment was braced up and marshalled against the heavy odds that had been out to crush its cultural existence. This revolt of the instinct for self-preservation had the desired effect. The hypnotic spell of foreign civilization began to

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recede, slowly but steadily, before a rising wave of self-consciousness of the Hindus. Mighty movements of socio-religious reform sprang up, one after another, to resuscitate the ancient culture of India and lead her once more to evolve a glorious future.

BRĀHMO SAMĀJ

The earliest of these movements was the Brāhmo Samāj founded in the third decade of the nineteenth century by Raja Rammohan Roy, the first great patriot and reformer of modern India. Though born in the midst of orthodox Hindu traditions, the Raja had, in his youth, made an extensive study of both Islamic and Christian theology and developed a thoroughly modern as well as cosmopolitan outlook. Thus equipped, he felt that Hinduism needed pruning, before it could stand the carping criticisms of the Christian missionary and the rational atheist. Nothing less than a drastic purging of the Hindu pantheon could, he seemed to believe, disarm the modern critics. Anthropomorphism of all colours and shades must go, for then and then alone would Hinduism have nothing to be ashamed of. His rational thinking, evidently, could not reconcile itself to the idea of God having forms. With a stubborn bias against all particular names and forms of God bred of a rational discipline of his intellect on modern lines, the Raja proceeded to reform Hinduism. He hailed with delight the Upanishadic texts on Saguna Brahman, the formless Brahman with attributes, and perhaps he felt relieved

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to find that this view of God came almost in line with the concepts of Islam and Unitarian Christianity. Obviously he failed to discern the truth behind the various other views of God presented by the Upanishads. However, with necessary materials gleaned from the Hindu scriptures, the Raja built up, on a central concept of the formless God with attributes, a lofty monotheistic creed that could vie easily with the unitarian faiths of foreign origin.

It was to uphold such a creed that the Brāhmo Samāj was ushered into existence by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828. Though Hinduism had the glory of possessing the entire gamut of spiritual experience, the Brāhmo Samāj, under a pressing need of the hour, chose to strike the monochord of qualified monism. However, the gates of the Samāj were flung open to all men, irrespective of caste, community or nationality, provided they agreed to leave behind all ideas of God with particular names and forms. The proviso, undoubtedly, was a handicap to many ; yet it must be said that there was nothing of the hide-bound and stiff-necked orthodoxy about the Samāj.

This primarily religious movement brought in its wake a wave of social reform. The sense of equality and liberty awakened by the new system of education was given a rather free play in remoulding social customs. The Brāhmo Samāj went solid for the emancipation of women from all forms of social iniquities. It was up against early marriage and forced widowhood, and worked intrepidly for female

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education on modern lines. Later on, it launched a crusade against the caste-system and succeeded in banishing it altogether from the Brāhmo fold.

With such a social and religious credo the Brāhmo Samāj took the field simultaneously against atheism, Christianity, and Hindu orthodoxy. Under the able guidance of its brilliant leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Brahmananda Keshab Chunder Sen, who came in close succession, the Samāj passed through several phases of a highly useful career. It was primarily a Bengal movement with its headquarters in Calcutta, the then metropolis of India, and had very few followers outside this province.

In its conception of religious faith as well as social reform, the Brāhmo Samāj leaned at times to a considerable extent on exotic ideals. From its very inception it bore the stamp of Western Christianity. Raja Rammohan borrowed freely from Protestant Unitarianism to gloss over his Upanishadic creed, and Keshab Chunder went so far as to soak the very core of the Brāhmo creed with Christian ideals. Social customs also came to be flavoured rather too richly with the spices of Westernism. This unwarranted rush for foreign religious sentiments and social habits made the Brāhmo Samāj alien to Hindu traditions, and as a matter of course it had to step out of the pale of the Hindu society.

Yet, considering the circumstances the Samāj was born to fight with, one must admit that it did exactly

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what was needed urgently to serve its purpose. Nothing less than a veneer of European civilization on the social and religious framework of the Hindus could stop the wild craze of the young intelligentsia for changing their skin. And this was precisely what the Samāj did. A particular brand of old wine of the Hindus was served in new bottles imported from the West. It had the desired effect. It enabled the Samāj to save hundreds of young men from the benumbing grip of atheism and Christianity, and this surely was a brilliant record of a highly significant yeoman's service on the pages of the recent history of Indian culture.

ĀRYA SAMĀJ

When in the seventies of the last century, the Brāhmo Samāj of Bengal, under the leadership of Keshab Chunder, was about to be sucked in the maelstrom of Christian ideals, up rose from another corner of India a powerful religious movement that had no soft words for anything foreign. It came as a bold, resolute and straightforward challenge against the whole host of Western influence, materialistic as well as religious. Through this movement India asserted herself once more, and this time gave a free, vigorous and absolutely uncompromising expression of some of her own religious ideas and ideals. When she was almost cornered by the currents of modernism, she turned round and took a bold stand on the solid rock of her own ancient ideals.

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This was the Ārya Samāj movement launched in 1875 by Swami Dayananda in Bombay. The sponsor of this movement, like all traditional Hindu reformers, belonged to the monastic order. He was a thorough-bred Hindu *sannyāsin*, a vastly erudite Vedic scholar and a thundering polemic of the Indian type. From every point of view, he was a chip of the old block, and as such he differed widely from the Brāhmo leaders, who were intellectuals of the Western type and who went in for finding a half-way house between Hinduism and modern thoughts.

Like a sturdy champion, Swami Dayananda stood firmly by the Vedas and fought valiantly with all who had anything to say against the Hindu faith. It was not for him to put up with the malicious gibes of foreign missionaries; he hit them back with equal zeal. He returned the malignant attacks of Christian missionaries on Hinduism by his sledge-hammer blows on Christianity. He had nothing of the inferiority complex in him. Of Islam also he was a sworn adversary. Pre-eminently a fighter, he could never find himself in a mood to compromise with any one who did not see eye to eye with him. He could not shake hands even with the Brāhmo leaders, because they could not be one with him in acknowledging the divine origin and infallibility of the Vedas and in accepting the doctrine of rebirth. Besides, he had absolutely no sympathy for the post-Vedic developments of Hinduism, and ruthlessly criticized all who had any hand in distorting what appeared to him to be the true Vedic religion.

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He translated and interpreted the Vedas according to his own lights and stuck to his own view of the true Vedic religion with passionate loyalty. In his religion there was no room for the Absolute Brahman of the strict monist, nor for the dualist's Object of worship with various names and various forms. His iconoclastic zeal very naturally compelled him to walk out and make a room for the Ārya Samāj outside the precincts of the Hindu society.

This religious movement also was accompanied by sweeping changes of social customs. The caste-system as a religious institution was abolished; the monopoly of the Brāhmins over the Vedas was denied; women were liberated from a number of social disabilities. Besides, enthusiasm for a wide range of philanthropic activities including the spread of education became a remarkable feature of the Ārya Samāj.

Whatever defects may have crept into the religious faith of the Ārya Samāj owing to its one-sided view of the Vedas, this movement undoubtedly struck a genuine Hindu note, and that is why it appealed forcibly to the religious instinct of this race. Moreover, by breaking away from the practice of image-worship, it catered to the taste of modern intellectuals. The replacement of image-worship by Vedic sacrificial rites with sacred fire and oblations lent something like a romantic charm to the Ārya faith. Lastly, the radical changes of social customs were perfectly in tune with the spirit of the age. All these combined to crown the proselytizing efforts of the Ārya Samāj with success. All over

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Northern India, specially in the Punjab, this new creed spread like wild fire, and in course of a few decades brought several lakhs of followers within its fold. Thus has the Ārya Samāj repelled from an extensive area the disastrous inroads of foreign culture and thereby recorded a chapter of momentous achievement in the cultural history of this land.

THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Mention may be made here of another religious movement that put in a timely appearance in India from abroad and, like the reform movements of Hinduism described above, went to check, to a certain extent, the influence of the Christian as well as materialistic thoughts of the period. This was the Theosophical movement.

Theosophy, as an interesting amalgam of mysticism, rational philosophy and scientific ideas, had been introduced and developed in Europe by some notable thinkers of the Continent like Swedenborg, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, Schelling, Baader and Molitor. It was in the hands, however, of Madame Blavatsky, a Russian lady, and Colonel Olcott, an ex-army officer of England, that Theosophy turned into a vigorous proselytizing creed and the Theosophical Society got its start in New York in 1875 to carry on a systematic and well-organized propaganda on behalf of the creed.

Drawing profusely from the occult and cabbalistic elements of Tibetan Buddhism, and dressing up the creed in techniques borrowed from the Hindus as well

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as from the modern spiritualists, the protagonists of this movement imparted to Theosophy an Oriental look and succeeded in making converts in the West by thousands. In their ingenious efforts at rationalizing their faith without spoiling its mysticism, they made a curious blend of scientific thoughts with some of the sublime ideas of Hindu theology and added to that a dash of esotericism derived from modern spiritualistic thoughts and formulas.

This novel creed, though absolutely foreign in origin and peculiarly hybrid in composition, appeared to have a rather fascinating effect even on the Indian mind. It caught the fancy of a group of enlightened Indians, who found peculiar delight in pinning their religious faith on unintelligible scientific phraseology and miracles. In this creed they got something that could help them to reconcile their natural craving for mysteries with the intellectual satisfaction of maintaining a pseudo-scientific pose. Naturally, they veered enthusiastically round this movement and eventually made a narrow escape from the influences of atheism and Christianity.

The Theosophical Society did not, however, put in its oar in social reform. They did not go in for drastic changes of social customs. This is why one could very well remain within the Hindu fold and yet subscribe to Theosophy. Hinduism was spacious enough to spare a niche for this novel creed. Moreover, by its fairly extensive publication of Hindu scriptures with translations, the Theosophical Society has put in some

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amount of solid work for Hinduism and contributed substantially to revive the faith of the enlightened Hindus in their own sacred lore.

Thus Theosophy, though ostensibly a new and eclectic creed, initiated in this country a movement that resembled, to a considerable extent, the reform movements of Hinduism so far as its salutary effect upon the Hindu society was concerned. It safeguarded the Hindus against the inroads of atheism and Christianity and did particularly in the South of India what the Brāhmo Samāj and the Ārya Samāj did in the North.

A RETROSPECT

The ebb-tide of Indian culture was thus followed by a number of socio-religious upheavals. Each of these strove to bear up the sinking faith. Each picked up, as we have seen, some elements of the Hindu faith and tried to make these immune from the dual criticism of Western dogmatists and rationalists. At least certain aspects of Hinduism were in this way set up as invulnerable bulwarks against the ravaging breakers of exotic culture.

And this turned the tide of events. The intellectuals who were being lured out of the Hindu mode of life turned round, and proceeded to see in a new light the teachings of their hoary ancestors. They learnt to appreciate, admire and even go so far as to follow some of these teachings.

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Thus, in and through these movements the self-consciousness of the Hindus asserted itself, made its way up through the opposing forces and endowed Hindu culture with a fresh lease of life. The process of cultural conquest that had started with political subjection and was running apace through English education and Christian missionary propaganda, had in this way to undergo a serious set-back. And this achievement alone endowed these timely movements with a unique value. Yet this was not all that could be desired. Much more was required for a complete renaissance of the Hindu faith. These movements stood only for partial and scrupulously sifted views of the Hindu religion.

Hinduism is a marvellous complex of a vast number of creeds tied essentially round a magnificent pivot of central unity. But to one who misses the central link of unity, this panoramic religion looks like a hopeless jumble of innumerable and divergent creeds ranging from the sublime to the grotesque. And from these, naturally, he has to pick and choose one to which he can heartily subscribe.

This is exactly what the reformers had to do. Failing to grasp the grand secret of synthesis and mistaking various important aspects of Hinduism as rank superstition, they proceeded to purge Hinduism of all that appeared meaningless and useless in the monochrome light of their own reading of the scriptures. They failed to have a comprehensive vision and realize the significance of the vast and splendid array of

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religious ideas and ideals evolved by the Hindu sages through scores of centuries. Yet galvanized by their own convictions, they made a tremendous fusillade on some of the vital elements of the Hindu faith.

Consequently, while proceeding with the best of motives to put the entire house of the Hindus in order, both the Brāhmo Samāj and the Ārya Samāj found themselves thrown out of the orthodox Hindu society and compelled to shift for themselves by creating independent folds. They registered, no doubt, the allegiance of the intellectuals who had been or were about to be on the move towards Western cultural ideals. But the number of these intellectuals was insignificantly small compared with the vast mass of orthodox Hindus who refused to be enlightened by the reformers. Thus failing to clean the Augean stable, as the bulk of the Hindu society appeared to them, each of the reforming groups had to step aside with a handful of followers.

THE ORTHODOX STAND

The orthodox masses, under the traditional lead of Hindu saints and classical scholars (pundits), plodded on in their old socio-religious ruts. Hardly did they give any serious attention to the disastrous effects of the impact of foreign culture on the modern intelligentsia of the Hindu society. Perhaps they blinked superciliously at the aggressive march of foreign thoughts and did not feel the necessity of shielding their beliefs with a rationale that could stand the

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destructive missiles of modern critics. Apparently secure in their age-old beliefs, they stuck fast, perhaps blindly, to the multi-coloured legacy of Hindu ideas and ideals. Rightly or wrongly, the orthodox masses chose to stand or fall with the entirety of Hindu traditions and refused to accept any type of sectional Hinduism from the reformers.

In the eyes of the reformers, however, this attitude of the orthodox masses appeared to be fanatic and hazardous to a degree. They believed that the stolid indifference of the masses to the time-forces and to the urgent need of overhauling their creed was bound to end in a disaster. They apprehended that if the conservative elements failed to forego some of their religious ideas and ideals and to conform their creed to the obvious intellectual demand of the age, the main bulk of the Hindu society was doomed to a sure and inevitable dissolution.

The apprehensions of the reformers do not seem to have been merely an unwarranted note of alarmists. To any rational observer of the period it would appear that until and unless something turned up to fortify the entire domain of Hindu faith and culture, Hinduism as a living religion with its vast conglomeration of ideas and ideals would cease to exist, and nothing would be able to save the Hindu society from a complete disintegration by the explosive discharges of modern thoughts. Hence, so long as something was not forthcoming to protect Hinduism in its entirety from the disruptive influence of foreign cultural ideals, the

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determined stand of the masses under the orthodox lead of the traditional custodians of the Hindu faith surely involved the grave risk of bringing the ancient religion to the very verge of extinction. Such a stand could not but appear foolhardy to a degree not only to the reformers but even to critical and impartial observers, because the very life of the society was obviously at stake through the orthodox bid for the entire edifice of Hinduism.

HINDU RENAISSANCE

But, miraculously enough, the Hindu society escaped the impending disaster. The stubborn and apparently foolhardy stand of the orthodox masses did not end in a hopeless fiasco. The orthodox society had not to wait long, when a phenomenon of paramount importance took place to infuse enormous strength into the entire range of Hindu convictions, and thus to bring about a complete renaissance of the Hindu religion.

The life and message of Sri Ramakrishna constituted precisely such a phenomenon. Sri Ramakrishna appeared before the Hindu society with a phenomenal life of intense spirituality, a remarkably broad and synthetic vision of Hinduism and an extraordinarily simple and illuminating exposition of all the ideas and ideals of Hindu theology.

His life and message were perfectly in tune with the whole tenor of Hindu thoughts and aspirations, and as such harmonized completely with the lives and teach-

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ings of the sages, seers and prophets who had preceded him. Like them he took a very firm stand on the bed-rock of realization and 'spake like one in authority.' From the fulness of his heart was delivered a message that had the strength and necessary sanction of meeting the pressing demands of the age. Both the faithful conservatives and the rational radicals gradually came to find in him a distinguished saviour of the Hindu view of life.

A careful scrutiny of the orthodox Hindu mind will make it clear why it has made such a prompt and vigorous response to Sri Ramakrishna's call.

Realization is the key-note of Hinduism. That the highest truths of religion can be realized even in this life, and that real religion begins with such realization are the fundamental beliefs that have governed Hindu life for ages. To the illustrious sages, seers and prophets of India, the eternal verities of life and existence have been facts of everyday experience endowed with much greater value than the sordid and evanescent objects of the sense-world. And it was the pure and resplendent light of such spiritual visions that went to colour all their thoughts, aspirations and achievements. This is why these inspired sponsors of Hinduism subordinated all other facts of religious life to one supreme demand, namely, that religion instead of ending in mere talks, theories, dogmas and church organizations must culminate in the realization of the great truths it embodies. The Hindu mind took its lessons from these inspired teachers and accepted this clear, unequivocal

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and imperious demand as the central feature of its religious outlook.

It is clearly in deference to such a fundamental demand for realization that the Hindu mind has been able to accommodate any sectarian creed that has succeeded in demonstrating the efficacy of a practical method of realizing spiritual truths. This is how so many apparently divergent creeds have cropped up and found a place within the outstretched arms of Hinduism. The highly metaphysical and discriminative processes of the Advaitins, the technical methods of concentration of the followers of the Rāja-Yoga, the austere bodily disciplines of the Haṭha-Yogins, the ritualistic devotion and culture of divine love of the Śākta, Vaishṇava and other followers of the *bhakti* cult, the dark and morally reprehensible esoteric rites of the occult schools of Śāktaism and Vaishṇavism, including the ceremonial orgies of the dreaded Kāpālikas—all these came to form a bizarre conglomeration of spiritual disciplines that Hinduism in its enthusiastic quest after the eternal and transcendent truths had occasions to evolve. It was evidently the intense longing of the Hindu mind for communion with the Divine that gave rise to such a wide variety of spiritual disciplines ranging from the sublime to the grotesque.

It was, moreover, the same inner urge for spiritual realization that ushered in innumerable orders of monks and ascetics with absolutely different schedules of religious life. Even at the present moment one finds in India thousands of men foregoing secular work and

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ostensibly devoting their lives to a serious and intense search for spiritual truths along numerous paths chosen by the various groups. Economically unproductive they are, no doubt; yet they are supported reverentially by the Hindu society. This clearly proves that this society does still bear a very strong and genuine love for the grand ideal of spiritual realization, for which Buddha, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Chaitanya, Rāmānanda, Kavīr, Mīrā Bāī and all other saints and seers spent their lives. In the life of the religious recluse the orthodox masses catch a glimpse of this magnificent ideal, and with religious care they pay their spontaneous homage to such a life.

This determined attitude of the orthodox Hindus towards spiritual realization as the very basis of religious life necessitated, for a true revival of Hinduism, the advent of a seer with whom the ultimate truths were not merely fine and well-spun yarns of intellectual speculation, but solid facts of direct experience, more real, tangible and precious than the whole array of sense-objects. Nothing short of such a seer, absorbed in an unbroken communion with the Divine, would have the power to command the faith and respectful attention of the orthodox masses. A practical demonstration of the truths behind all the various creeds incorporated in Hinduism by the deep and extensive realizations of a majestic seer was a desideratum that alone could stir up the Hindu masses to bring about a fresh and vigorous revival of their religion.

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Sri Ramakrishna came to fulfil such a need. In him the orthodox society found a pre-eminent seer who had the potency of bringing about a mighty awakening of the old religion of the Hindus with all that it stands for. The process is going on even at the present moment, and the masses are becoming alive to the fact, as Mahatma Gandhi has put it, that "The story of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa's life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion. Ramakrishna is a living embodiment of Godliness. His sayings are not those of a mere learned man, but they are pages from the Book of Life. They are revelations from his own experiences. They therefore leave on the reader an impression which he cannot resist. In this age of scepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light." It is quite natural that such a life has got hold of the orthodox Hindu mind and has been shaking it to its very depths.

The radicals too found in the realizations of Sri Ramakrishna a wonderful solution of their intellectual doubts. This is why a truculent advocate of modern thoughts like Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda), who had drunk deep out of the dangerous fountains of rational atheism and also out of the refined springs of Brāhmo theism, could surrender himself completely to this extraordinary man of phenomenal spiritual insight.

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To quote the glowing words of Monsieur Romain Rolland: "Thus at the feet of the simple Ramakrishna, the most intellectual, the most imperious, the most justly proud of all the great religious spirits of modern India humbled himself."

This incident is highly significant. Through it one can read the effect of Sri Ramakrishna's realizations on the entire modern school of rational thought, of which Swami Vivekananda was a true and brilliant representative.

From its intimate contact with the Master, the highly rational mind of Swami Vivekananda realized the outstanding fact that "the first qualification for knowing, judging, and if desirable, condemning a religion or religions is to have made experiment oneself in the fact of religious consciousness." The seer announces the import of his vision and declares emphatically that the same vision is open to all who want seriously to get it; and it is up to the rationalist to verify the seer's statement by his own experiments, before he may reasonably be in a position to pass his verdict on the vision and to assess its values. Rationalist to the core as Swami Vivekananda was, he saw this position clearly and proceeded to test the validity of Sri Ramakrishna's message by his own realization. He threw himself heart and soul into the momentous experiment and came out of the breathless quest beaming with spiritual illumination and beatitude. And having ascertained by the acid test of his own realizations the truth behind Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, he

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went about broadcasting the well-verified message through the ideology and language of the modern world.

By his intellectual doubt, rational enquiry, serious experiment and consequent illumination, Swami Vivekananda has burnt for the rationalists a path through the wild heath of modern thoughts leading right up to the spiritual realm of Hindu ideas and ideals. His life itself is a pillar of fire to guide the benighted moderner. It dispels all honest doubts and hair-splitting queries of the modern intellectuals about the values and significance of the apparently heterogeneous contents of Hindu theology.

Moreover, by his lucid, perfectly logical and convincing expositions of Hinduism in the light of the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda has invested this religion with a rationale that can stand the severest scrutiny of reason and hold its ground against the whole host of modern critics.

Hence, through the wonderfully inspiring life and highly rational teachings of this great modern apostle of Hindu India, the spiritual influence of Sri Ramakrishna's life and message has been brought to bear upon the entire rationalistic school of the present era. This is how the enlightened section of the modern Hindu society is being led gradually to recognize Sri Ramakrishna as the unquestioned redeemer of the Hindu faith.

Thus have the unique life and message of Sri Ramakrishna quickened with new life and faith both the conservative and radical wings of Hindu India and

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ushered in a new era of Hindu renaissance. Monsieur Romain Rolland has hit the nail right on the head by remarking with his characteristic force of conviction: "The man whose image I here invoke was the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people. Although he has been dead forty years, his soul animates modern India."

This resurgence of modern Hinduism is pregnant with the possibilities of evolving a mighty and glorious future. No longer does India look merely like a splendid mausoleum of the dead, though glorious, past. She is pulsating vigorously with new life and new faith, and is bent upon sending a wave of her cultural ideals all over the world.

One may get a closer view of this resurgent phase of Hinduism in and through the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, 'the Messiah of Bengal,' as Romain Rolland has put it, and also of his 'St. Paul,' Swami Vivekananda. Of these a short but fairly comprehensive *résumé* is given in the following pages.

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II

Sri Ramakrishna's Life: A Web of Spirituality

PERSPECTIVE

Ramakrishna's life is something out of the ordinary. It lacks the wealth of events and striking achievements that are commonly associated with the lives of great men. One should therefore get a correct perspective of this life as a whole before going into details. For thus equipped, one may be in a position to find the right approach towards this extraordinary life and give proper values to its contents.

Ramakrishna never came into the limelight as a public man. He was neither an orator nor a writer. He never figured as a political leader, nor did he ever appear in the rôle of a social reformer. Compared with the distinguished dignitaries of the Brāhmo Samāj and Ārya Samāj of his own time, he was just a person on the side-walk. The aristocratic dignity of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, the reputed oratory and majestic personality of Srijut Keshab Chunder Sen, the vast erudition and polemical zeal of Swami Dayananda were all in striking contrast with the humble and unostentatious life of Ramakrishna. Neither aristocracy of birth, nor wealth, nor academic distinction, nor power and prestige in the temporal sense had anything to do with his career. His

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life conspicuously lacked the glitter of those very things that attract the admiring gaze of the general public.

Yet this humble life had something of immense value and significance, something very subtle that eludes the grasp of the common historian. Even Swami Vivekananda, in spite of his versatile genius, could never get over his hesitation in attempting to produce a pen-picture of his master's life. He openly confessed his apprehension that his attempt might prove a hopeless failure. Even if some allowance be made for Swami Vivekananda's modesty, it is obvious that there is something in Ramakrishna's life that cannot be easily snapped with a biographer's camera. Like the lives of the general run of great men, his life did not draw all its materials from the sense-world, and hence a bare record of his contacts with this world cannot bring his entire life into relief.

The fringe of his life touched, no doubt, the material environment about him, and this may be described and interpreted in terms of the sense-world. But the bulk of its contents, wherein lay the beauty, grandeur, power and significance of Ramakrishna's life, belonged to a region beyond the ken of the ordinary biographer. The majesty of this life lay more in the unfathomable depths of the mind than on the surface. He did, of course, breathe the air about him just like any other man, but his thoughts and feelings welled up from the supersensuous depths of his mind and made his whole personality resplendent with a divine glow of

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beatitude. His entire being, from the centre right up to the circumference, was a marvellous web of spirituality. Spiritual ecstasy and realization were the yarn of which this wonderful texture was made. Hence its contents are incomprehensible to any one who is not endowed with a spiritual insight as keen and extensive as that of Ramakrishna himself. This is why Swami Vivekananda said that he together with all his brother-disciples could never bring out an accurate and exhaustive survey of this wonderful and really inscrutable life.

It is quite likely, moreover, that an attempt in this line may end in producing a distorted picture. This reminds one of a parable narrated by Ramakrishna. There was a blind man who wanted to know what milk looked like. He was told that it was white as a crane. Then he desired to be acquainted with the look of a crane. He was informed that a crane resembled a sickle. The point of resemblance was thus shifted from the colour of the crane to the form of its neck. However, the blind man again enquired what a sickle looked like. This time, failing to find any other analogy, the friend bent his own forearm in the form of a sickle and asked the blind man to feel it. The latter passed his hand softly over the bent forearm of his friend and exclaimed with delight, "Ah, now it is perfectly clear. Milk is something like a bent forearm." The parable is precisely to the point; a spiritually blind person is apt to have such a ridiculously distorted idea about Ramakrishna from the materials of his external life. As a matter of fact, there were not a few persons who

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saw in him nothing but unmistakable signs of a maniac or a neurotic. These persons can safely be pigeonholed with the blind man in the parable.

Within the brief span of fifty years Ramakrishna lived the entire spiritual history of the Hindu race. The staggering depth and immensity of his life is beyond the range of intellectual comprehension. Before one may grasp the import of his life thoroughly, one has to solve the mysteries of the universe and realize the eternal truths of existence. The spiritual web of this life has to be observed in the flashlight of intuition. Its value and significance will go on increasing as the observer will gain ground in his spiritual journey.

Through this angle one has to look at Ramakrishna, and try to comprehend, as far as practicable, the supersensuous contents of his unique life. Some of his disciples, endowed with spiritual vision of a very high order, have left on record some materials of this remarkable life, and from these materials a gleaning has been made to compile the following life-sketch, which may be taken for what it is worth.

THE WONDER-CHILD

One hundred years ago, in the early dawn of the 18th February, 1836, Ramakrishna was born in a quiet, out-of-the-way village of Bengal. His birthplace may very well be labelled as the exact antipodes of the modern world, and it is yet to be found couched in its pristine simplicity. In the district of Hooghly, nestled among palm trees and mango groves and surrounded

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by rice-fields, Kamarpukur stands at a distance of at least twenty-five miles from the nearest railway station, and even now maintains the simple pastoral look of a medieval village.

In this village, more than a century ago, lived an orthodox Brāhmin couple, Khudiram Chattopadhyaya and Chandra Devi, with a little group of children and near relatives. Khudiram was a village priest by vocation; and in those days it was quite an honoured job worthy of a devout Brāhmin, but it could not bring in much money. So, though of course he commanded respect by his profession, he was not well off. He just managed to get on with his family without running into debt.

His house consisted of a few cottages with mud walls and thatched roofs. On one side of the house is still to be found a tank and on another side a village road, across which stands an old, worn-out temple of Śiva. In this house Khudiram and his consort led their simple and pious lives centring round the daily worship of their family deity, Raghuvīra (Rāma), and impressed their neighbours by their genuine and spontaneous honesty, love and generosity.

Within the house there was a tiny thatched shed set apart for extracting rice grains. It was furnished with an archaic wooden tackle meant for husking paddy, and an earthen oven for boiling the corn. It was in a corner of this blessed shed that Chandra Devi gave birth to her illustrious child who came to be known in later life as Ramakrishna. As soon as the

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babe was born, it slipped into the neighbouring oven, where it was detected, a little later, with its body covered with ashes. Did the babe want to renounce the world the moment it touched the earth? Or did it want to hide itself from the eyes of the curious public? Who can tell?

Though the immediate surroundings of the birth-place were primitive to a degree, nature all about it was in the jauntiest of her moods. It was a Bengal spring, when, after the benumbing spell of a fairly long winter, nature put on a gala attire of green foliage and shining blossoms. Birds chirped on the trees, and everything seemed to be sparkling with new life and freshness. In the midst of such a vernal festivity, nature received her honoured guest.

Both the parents had a number of mysterious visions connected with the conception and birth of Ramakrishna. It may be noted, without perhaps straining the credulity of modern readers, that the ante-diluvian surroundings of Ramakrishna's birthplace remind one of Bethlehem and the blessed manger.

In due time the child was christened Gadadhar after the name of the deity in the holy temple of Gaya, where the Hindus offer oblations for appeasing their departed ancestors; because it was a vision of this deity that had enlightened Khudiram about the coming child, while he had been on a pilgrimage to Gaya.

Gadadhar grew up into a lively young lad. Graceful and frolicsome, he was always full of spirits and fascinated everybody by his innocent pranks and

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charming manners. In his look and deportment there was a graceful feminine touch, which endeared him particularly to women and girls. No prudish sentiments could ever stand in the way of their adoring him till he was thirteen years of age.

However, during the first few years of his life, there was nothing unusual about him. He was just a sportive young darling of the neighbourhood. But before long somehow he stumbled into the region of ecstasy; and with this incident his life stepped out of the ordinary rut.

One summer day, Gadadhar, a child of six or seven, was out in the rice-fields with a small wicker basket containing some puffed rice for his usual breakfast. He was mooning about in the fields, munching, in a leisurely way, mouthfuls of the simple edible. As he was moving along a raised narrow and meandering path dividing small plots of paddy land, a dark cloud suddenly appeared in the horizon and swiftly spread over the whole sky. The child's gaze was fixed on the gathering clouds, when a flight of snow-white cranes appeared in view and flew across the dark bosom ot the thunder-cloud. The contrast of colours wove an enchanting sight that got a stranglehold on the boy's mind and steeped it into an overwhelming ecstasy of joy. Lost to outward sense, he fell down on the ground, from where he had to be picked up and carried home by some people who happened to find him in that plight.

This incident was narrated by Ramakrishna himself, and it gives one enough food for serious reflection.

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Some poets have been known to be subject to ecstatic fits caused by enthralling sights of nature ; but it has to be remembered that at the back of their response to nature there is always to be found a good deal of education, contemplation, training of the imagination and systematic culture of the emotions along the line. The case of the unsophisticated mind of a boy of six or seven being plunged headlong into a trance by a charming sight of nature is perhaps a unique record of mystic experience. How could it come about? This, surely, is a question that can hardly be answered. It baffles all honest attempts at explanation. Unless he is put down as a helpless victim of neurosis and psychic disturbance, this incident clearly shows " what infinite spaces and tremendous depths lay hidden in the little body of this laughing child."

However, this was the first occasion when the flood-gate of his emotions was flung open, and it was done by a stirring appeal of nature's beauty. This gives one a peep into the boy's mind. His passionate and instinctive love for the beautiful marks him out as a born artist. This is borne out by some other outstanding facts of his early life. For hours he would sit attentively by the potters and learn to mould and paint images of clay till he became quite an adept. He was an ardent lover of music and poetry and took great delight in singing pastoral airs, reciting beautiful passages from the Hindu epics, and enacting, with a group of his village chums, interesting episodes out of the Purāṇas.

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Once when he was about nine years of age, he had to appear in the rôle of Śiva in a dramatic performance in his village. With matted hair on his head, a tiger-skin about his loins and ashes rubbed over his body, the boy approached the audience with a slow and sober gait, carrying a trident in his hand. Suddenly his mind was swung up from the normal plane to the holy ideal he was going to represent. Lord Śiva possessed his mind and he stood stiff and motionless. Tears of joy flooded his little cheeks, and his face was radiant with a divine glow. But for these, he would have been taken practically for dead; and this state of complete self-absorption lasted for nearly three days.

He was overpowered by a similar emotion on another occasion, when he was out with a party of women for paying homage to the goddess Viśālākshī in a neighbouring village. They were singing hymns in honour of the goddess as they were proceeding. All on a sudden Gadadhar stood fixed to the ground, tears of joy coursed down his cheeks, and he was lost completely to outward sense. All ordinary remedies for epileptic fits proved useless; neither fanning nor splashing of water could revive the consciousness of the boy. When, however, the women, in their despair, started repeating the name of the goddess in his ears, his mind gradually came back to the normal plane.

Frequency of these ecstasies, no doubt, alarmed his parents. But Gadadhar himself would never feel troubled. He knew what an overwhelming joy wrapped him round before transporting his mind from

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the outer world. Meditation on a deity would call up the real form before his mind's eye, and immediately his outward consciousness would be sucked in a whirlpool of surging emotions. The phenomenon was so natural and spontaneous with him that he found nothing unusual about it. Moreover, as soon as a trance would be over, he would find himself as hale and hearty as ever. This was why he asked his relatives not to worry about his ecstatic fits. These trances undoubtedly left a divine impress on his young mind, but the child in him did not suffer in the least from these spiritual raptures. He would talk, laugh and move about as free and gay as if nothing serious had happened in the interim to ruffle the smooth and natural course of his life. He would look neither blue nor sour, nor would he indulge in wild ravings. No trace of abnormality could be found anywhere about Gadadhar, though, of course, there was something assuredly supernormal in his trances, which, he believed, brought him in touch with Divinity.

Regarding these mystic states, it will surely be safer and wiser for one to rely more on Ramakrishna's own reading than on the gropings of the experimental psychologists, who should better be left to revise their findings in the light of the data furnished by this wonderful life. Who knows what would happen if the boy was subjected to a course of psychotherapy? A European savant thinks that such treatment would perhaps have extinguished the spiritual flame of the child, depriving, in this way, the world of the precious

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contributions of Ramakrishna. One may hold with equal reason that such treatment, instead of spoiling the spiritual life of Gadadhar, might end rather in enriching experimental psychology by hitting upon some profound truths about the supernormal experience of genuine mystics. Instead of jumping to a hasty conclusion either way, it is better that one looks upon the trances of Gadadhar as they were, listens to what he himself said about these, and then proceeds to assess them according to one's own light.

One of the interesting pastimes of the boy was to spend hours in the company of wandering monks and pilgrims, who, on their way to the holy city of Puri, would halt at the village rest-house. Gadadhar loved to serve these holy men by fetching for them water and fuel, and delighted in listening with rapt attention to their songs, hymns and religious discussions. He would pick up from their talks and store in his little brain stories about saints, pictures of holy places and interesting details of exclusively religious lives. The mysteries of an itinerant life cast a spell upon him. Through the holy men about him the young visionary caught a glimpse of an enchanting world of piety, renunciation, purity and contentment. Thus on the plastic mind of young Gadadhar were imprinted, clearly and indelibly, the time-honoured traditions of Hindu ascetics and devotees.

At the age of nine he was duly invested with the holy thread of the Brāhmin, and the privilege of worshipping the family deity was thrown open to him.

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This filled him with intense joy. Nothing delighted him so much as contemplating on the divine glory of the Lord of the universe and pouring out his sincere love and devotion through the ceremonial worship of Rughuvīra. This was precisely his forte, and in this his enthusiasm would break all bounds. At times he would dive deep in meditation on the deity, and his young mind would be illumined by spiritual visions. Moreover, every religious function in the neighbourhood, specially of a congregational nature, would attract Gadadhar irresistibly and draw him within its inner circle.

However, to everything else the boy was lukewarm. The school had very little attraction for him. It is curious that mathematics particularly repelled him. Perhaps the idea of calculation associated with it ran against the very grain of his inner life. His aversion to school learning cannot be ascribed to poverty of intellect. He was rather endowed with an extraordinary fund of memory, imagination and power of judgement. He could recite verbatim the stories from the Hindu epics and the Purāṇas after hearing them only once from the strolling minstrels. He would compose songs and plays for his own dramatic troupe consisting of some of the village youngsters. And his rather precocious power of judgement was evident when, like young Jesus, he settled the heated controversy of a group of classical scholars by his simple and spontaneous solution of a nettling problem. Undoubtedly, his intellect was as sharp as a razor ; yet the school had

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little charm for him. The reason has to be sought elsewhere.

When, at the age of seventeen, Gadadhar joined his elder brother Ramkumar, who had started a school of classical learning in Calcutta after the death of their father, he told his brother rather brusquely that he had absolutely no mind to go in for any kind of bread-winning education. The only irrepressible desire of his life was to hold communion with God, and consequently he held in scant regard anything that could not help him in realizing this object. He scanned the scholars about him and compared their lives with their talks and professions. He weighed them carefully in the balance and found them hopelessly wanting in purity and devotion. And these were what he valued more than anything else on earth, because without these, he knew perfectly well, one could never attain God-consciousness.

The attitude of young Gadadhar towards scholarship clearly foreshadowed his later conviction. In his mature age he exposed, by his piercing remarks, the hollowness of those scholars who lacked piety and wallowed in impurity. He used to say that just as vultures would fly high up in the air, but their gaze would invariably be fixed on the stinking carrion on earth, so impious scholars might soar very high on the wings of their intellect, but their minds would always remain chained to the sordid objects of the sense-world. He would sometimes scoff at a university degree as a source of bondage, in so far as it served to fill one's

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mind with conceit and thus stand in the way of one's spiritual growth. Thus would he bring out in bold relief the evils of scholarship divorced from spirituality. When, however, learning combined with it modesty, purity, selflessness and devotion, he held it in high esteem. This is why Ramakrishna went to pay his compliments to the magnanimous scholar Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and told him straight that he honoured him because he really possessed the right kind of learning that went to exalt a man. Moreover, he was highly fond of listening to the discourses of religious men versed in the scriptures. Nevertheless, it is a fact that he laid more stress on spiritual practice for realizing God than on book-learning. On one occasion he jeered at one of his studious disciples for being too much attached to books. His mind was full of divine music; any other sound, even that of the intellect, would grate upon his ears, unless, of course, the latter was in perfect harmony with the spiritual symphony of his heart. From his very childhood, this trait became prominent in him. Gadadhar's young mind was so tuned that he could not stand anything that did not square completely with the spiritual yearnings of his soul. The school with its obvious object of imparting mere bread-winning education was one of these things, and this was why it acted on his nerves.

THE YOUNG PRIEST

In the year 1855 his eldest brother Ramkumar accepted the charge of a newly erected temple near

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Calcutta as its chief priest. As the founder of the temple, Rani Rasmani, a rich lady of Calcutta, happened to belong to an inferior caste, Ramakrishna's orthodox mind revolted at the idea of having to live within the precincts of that temple. It proved a difficult task for Ramkumar to bring his youngest brother along with him to stay in the temple. Young Ramakrishna had quite a will of his own. When any idea associated particularly with the religious tradition of the land would get into his head, he would stick to it with the greatest tenacity. So, even when he yielded to the overtures of his elder brother, he did it under protest, with necessary safeguards for preserving the integrity of his caste. For a considerable length of time Ramakrishna lived with his brother in Rani Rasmani's temple without partaking even of the food offered to the deity. He persisted in cooking his own meals by the side of the holy Ganges. He was a staunch believer in orthodoxy, and would cling tenaciously even to a bit of religious superstition so long as he could not see through it and find convincing reasons for discarding it. When, however, he would find that any idea harboured in his mind stood in the way of genuine spirituality, he would take no time to tear it to pieces. Hence he stuck faithfully to the traditional idea about caste-restriction for a pretty long time. Slowly and steadily, however, consciousness of the Divine presence in the temple dawned upon his mind and helped him out of his squeamishness about caste.

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The following year, when Ramakrishna was just beyond his teens, his eldest brother died, and he found himself installed as the head priest of the temple. From this time on almost up to the end of his life the temple continued to be his permanent residence and the prominent background of his spiritual career. By accepting the charge of the temple, Ramakrishna entered the second and the most momentous chapter of his life. The environment of the temple together with his priestly functions went to stir the depths of his soul.

The temple to which Ramakrishna at the age of twenty became attached as the chief priest, is situated in Dakshineswar, a suburban village about four miles to the north of Calcutta. Within the compound there are quite a number of temples meant for the worship of different deities; the biggest one, however, is reserved for the goddess Kālī, the Divine Mother. Hence the temple is now commonly known as the Dakshineswar Kālī temple.

It stands directly on the Ganges, on its eastern bank, and covers a fairly extensive area of land. The northern section of this land and a portion in the east contain an orchard, flower gardens and a couple of tanks; the southern section is finished in brick and mortar. Exactly at the centre of the latter, a long flight of steps of an imposing bathing ghat leads from the Ganges to a roofed open terrace. On each side of this terrace stand in a row six temples dedicated to Śiva. Adjoining the terrace and the long line of Śiva temples lies a large paved court, rectangular in shape

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and running from north to south. In the centre of this court there are two stately temples; the bigger one facing south belongs to Kālī, and the other facing the Ganges is dedicated to Rādhākānta, the master of Rādhā's heart, that is, Kṛishṇa. Immediately to the south of the Kāli temple there is a spacious music hall supported by a number of pillars, and all around the paved courtyard save on the west there are rooms set apart for kitchen, stores, quarters for the temple-staff and guests. In the north-west angle of the court, just beyond the last of the Śiva temples on that side, one can still find a humble room with a semicircular portico facing the Ganges. This was the room in which Ramakrishna spent a considerable portion of his life.

The plan and execution of the various structures, the lay-out of gardens and groves, and its position by the side of the murmuring river have combined to lend a highly artistic charm to the whole scene. The nine domes of the Kālī temple rise majestically above the line of uniform spires of the twelve Śiva temples, the monotony of which is relieved artistically by the terrace in the middle. This produces a magnificent front-view and attracts the wondering gaze of all travellers by boat and people across the river even from a long distance.

Within the main temple there is a basalt figure of the goddess Kālī dressed in a gorgeous apparel of gold brocade and decked lavishly with precious ornaments. She stands on the white breast of Śiva, who is lying stock-still on a thousand-petalled silver-lotus. Her

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pose can hardly be described. It combines the blood-curdling terror of destruction with the soothing assurance of the affectionate mother. She is the Cosmic Power; she deals out death as much as she creates and preserves the universe. Hence she is terrible and yet gentle. A garland of skulls hangs loosely from her neck and a girdle of human arms runs round her waist. She has two pairs of arms, one on each side. With the lower left hand she holds a severed human head and with the upper she grips a blood-stained sabre; while with one of the right hands she offers boons and with the remaining one she allays fears. Seeing her holy consort Śiva beneath her feet, she blushes and expresses her delicate sentiment like an Indian lady by biting her protruded tongue. Her three eyes strike dismay into the hearts of the wicked, and yet pour out affection for the devotees. Thus stands, in her benignly cruel majesty, Kālī, the Divine Mother, in the magnificent central temple of Dakshineswar and is addressed every day by a large concourse of devotees and pilgrims as Bhavatāriṇī, the Saviour of the world.

Besides Kālī representing cosmic power, Ramakrishna had before him, in a separate temple within the same compound, Kṛishṇa symbolizing divine love and beauty, and in each of the twelve temples along the Ganges, Śiva suggesting the Absolute. The awful and yet lovely goddess of the Tāntrikas, the soul-enthralling divine flute-player of the Vaishṇavas, and the self-absorbed and all-renouncing Lord of the Śaivas lived together before his eyes, representing so many distinct

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ideals of Hindu devotees. A perfect concord of the religious sentiments of three major sects of Hinduism reigned over the whole place, and thus set up, probably, an appropriate background for the all-encompassing sweep of Ramakrishna's religious realizations that were to come in the fulness of time. Of the divine household, however, Bhavatāriṇī or Kālī appeared to be the sovereign mistress, and it was she who captivated the supple mind of the young priest and brought it completely under her majestic sway.

From early dawn till nine o'clock in the evening Ramakrishna remained engaged in the service of the Divine Mother. Every day he bathed her, dressed her, fed her and led her to repose on a silver bed. With a devout heart and scrupulous care he would go through the daily round of scheduled rituals, and chant in his melodious voice sacred hymns and *mantras* (holy texts) in the prescribed order. Long before sunrise and immediately after sundown, he would wave ceremoniously before the goddess sacred lights and incense, and in tune with this graceful function would issue soft and touching strains of the Indian flute from the music tower. He would deck her every day with fragrant flowers and beautiful garlands, and punctuate the various acts of service by the musical sound of the conch and bell. Thus aroma and music filled the air about him; exquisite beauty of forms appealed to his aesthetic sense from every side; and in the midst of these, surpassing all, stood the

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Divine Enchantress demanding one-pointed devotion and service from her young attendant, and thrilling his naive mind with her bewitching smile.

THE MAD QUEST ON UNCHARTED SEAS

Thus Ramakrishna's thoughts were glued to the service of the Divine Mother, and he drank her entrancing smile till all was blue. He became intoxicated with a great yearning for seeing the goddess in her glory. Nothing else could appease the 'great hunger' of his soul. He could not content himself like an ordinary priest with plodding punctiliously through a fixed routine of ritualistic observance. Neither could he work up the zest of the common worshipper in praying for wealth, honour and worldly success. His mind was pitched too high to be moved by these trivial desires. He craved to see God face to face. He was seized with a burning passion to rend asunder the veil that concealed behind it the heart-throbs of the living goddess. With a tremendous earnestness he panted to see a spark of life in the stone image. He could not bring his mind to believe that religion was a mere phantasy, that the Divine Mother was a mere fiction, a meaningless figment of the human imagination. He believed with the credulity of a child that Rāmprasād and other devotees had actually been blessed with the beatific vision of the Mother. So there was no reason why he should be barred from the glorious sight. This thought would pierce his mind like a rapier. He felt that the Mother with her infinite bliss was quite close

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to him and yet he could not see her. She was tantalizing him with disappointment.

The things of the world became absolutely insipid to him. Life appeared to be a mockery, if he was to drag on his miserable existence from day to day without tapping the eternal source of immortality and bliss. With absolute faith in the grace of the Mother, he would cry helplessly before her like a forlorn child and beseech her importunately to appear before him in her glory. For hours he would sit before her absorbed in meditation and at times break out into passionate appeals to the Mother through soul-stirring songs, hymns and prayers. At the end of each day, with bitter tears in his eyes, he would fling himself down on the ground and roll on it in despair, bemoaning piteously the loss of one day of his life without attaining his object. The cyclonic passion wrenched his mind completely from the earth and tossed it mercilessly on a sea of anguish. Tormented by a writhing agony, he struggled frantically to tear off the intolerable veil, utterly oblivious of the world around him. Laying aside his clothes and even his Brāhmaṇical thread, he would spend whole nights in meditation under an Āmalakī tree in an abandoned burial ground, covered densely with prickly shrubs, that would make one's flesh creep to pry into even in daylight. Thus, before going in for meditation he would trample under foot all weakening thoughts arising out of shyness, caste-conceit and fear. And he would not care to consider how his strange

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behaviour was being interpreted by other inmates of the temple.

Not conversant with Yoga, the traditional Hindu science of disciplining one's mind, and led solely by the impetuous zeal of his ecstatic moods, Ramakrishna advanced fearlessly along the hazardous path pointed out to him by his own unsophisticated mind. As days rolled on, the all-consuming passion brought him to the very limit of physical endurance. With his face and breast flushed with emotion, his cheeks flooded with tears and his body shaken all over with involuntary spasms, Ramakrishna, with his piteous look and pathetic cries, would rend the hearts of onlookers. One day, unable to stand the painful separation any longer, and seized by a grim determination, he rushed frantically to put an end to his life, when, all on a sudden, the Mother's grace descended upon him. The veil was off, the beatific vision was unfolded before his eyes, and he became immersed in an ocean of ecstasy.

Regarding this vision let us hear from his own lips: "One day I was torn with intolerable anguish. My heart seemed to be wrung like a wet towel. I was racked with pain. A terrible frenzy seized me at the thought that I might never be granted the blessing of this divine vision. I thought, if that were so, then enough of this life. A sword was hanging in the sanctuary of Kālī. My eyes fell upon it, and an idea flashed through my brain: The sword! It will help me to end it. I rushed up to it, and seized it like a mad man...And lo! the whole scene—doors, windows,

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the temple itself—vanished. It seemed as if nothing existed any more. Instead I saw an ocean of Spirit, boundless, dazzling. In whatever direction I turned, great luminous waves were rising. They bore down upon me with a loud roar, as if to swallow me up. In an instant they were upon me. They broke over me, they engulfed me. I was suffocated. I lost consciousness and I fell. How I passed that day and the next I know not. Round me rolled an ocean of ineffable joy. And in the depths of my being I was conscious of the presence of the Divine Mother."

After two days Ramakrishna emerged out of the trance of ecstatic joy with the sweet and endearing word 'Mother' issuing passionately from his quivering lips. Thus the whirlwind of spiritual yearning, after tossing the mind of the young priest and driving it recklessly on uncharted seas, brought it at last to the secure haven of beatific vision, and fixed it on the spot for a couple of days. But as soon as the brief period was over and the vision was off, the swirling forces of the wind swept it back to the tempestuous bosom of the sea of anguish.

Days were again spent in passionate appeals to the Divine Mother for revealing herself once more to him. The vision had whetted his desire, and he really behaved like a mad man, striving furiously to get another plunge into the serene lake of Beatitude. At times, unable to bear the pangs of separation from the Mother, he would rub his face on the earth till it got lacerated. His piteous cries would draw curious people round him.

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But the world faded out of his mind; the people about him looked like so many pictures or shadows; and he ignored their existence altogether while pouring out his emotions for the Mother.

Though the immediate effect of the first vision of the Divine Mother was to intensify the 'great hunger' of his soul and increase his feverish anguish of separation, it landed him gradually and unwittingly in an altogether new arena of spiritual consciousness. Whenever his paroxysm of pain became unbearably acute, he began to lose his outward consciousness and see before him in his trance the Divine Mother in her matchless splendour granting boon to her devotees and bidding them take courage. Thus, through frequent fits he would see her smiling, talking, consoling or teaching him in various ways. Sometimes he would see specks of light like a swarm of fire-flies before his eyes; at other times he would find himself enveloped by a veil of luminous mist. Again, he would see, with his eyes shut or open, luminous waves like molten silver spreading all about him.

By rapid strides his mind got beyond its limitations and caught within its sure grasp the precious object of his burning desire. The Divine Mother commenced to appear before him in his hours of meditation and even to speak to him and give him instructions concerning his daily duties. During this period, while going in for meditation he used to have a strange experience. He would distinctly hear rattling sounds proceeding in a certain order through the joints of his body, and feel

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as if somebody was locking them up and fixing up the body in an absolutely steady posture. Hours would pass by, his body remaining clamped to the earth like a piece of stone; until he heard similar sounds in a reverse order and felt that the joints were unlocked, it would be physically impossible for him to rise from his seat or even to shift an inch from his rigidly fixed posture.

Soon the scales fell completely from his eyes, and he required neither a trance nor a meditation to invoke the vision of the Mother. The stone image melted away for ever. It was thoroughly metamorphosed. In its place he invariably found, with his eyes wide open, the Divine Mother pulsating with life, radiating her smiles and showering her blessings upon him. He would actually feel her breath upon his hand. At night, in the lighted room, he could not discern, even with peering eyes, any shadow cast by her radiant form. When after his daily round of ritualistic duties he would retire to his room, he would hear the tinkling of anklets and feel that the Mother, like a young girl, was tripping up to the first floor of the temple. With his heart hammering in his breast, he would immediately rush out of the room, and from the court outside he would clearly see the Mother on the balcony of the upper storey, with her dark tresses streaming loosely about her and her gaze fixed intently on the Ganges.

These visions brought him closer to the Mother, and he clung to her with the earnestness of a babe. His familiarity with her stepped out of the limits of sacer-

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dotal etiquette. He was no longer to be tied down by the codes and formulas of ritualistic worship. Divine love surged in his heart, and there was no room for convention, formality or even the ordinary sense of propriety. He saw before him, more clearly and intensely than any other object on earth, the living presence of his beloved Mother, and very naturally he would rush to fondle her with the instinctive affection of a pet child.

He would see his Mother actually partaking of the food even before it was offered ceremoniously to her. Sometimes he would approach the throne of the goddess with a morsel of food in his hand and putting it to her lips entreat her to eat. At times he would himself take a portion of the food and then putting the remainder to the mouth of the goddess say in a perfectly familiar tone, "Well, I have eaten, now it is your turn." Often, with his eyes and chest flushed, he would approach her with tottering steps, touch her chin endearingly, and commence to sing, or talk, or joke, or laugh or even dance. Occasionally, at the end of the evening service, after leading the Mother to her bed he would say, "Well, you wish me to lie down? Very well, I shall do it," and would lie for some time on the Mother's bed. Every morning, while plucking flowers for the Mother's garland, he would be seen speaking to or caressing somebody, or laughing, or indulging in merriment. He would never close his eyes during the night and would spend it always in an exalted mood, talking to some one or singing, or sitting in meditation under

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the Āmalakī tree. Sometimes his intimacy with the Mother would deepen eventually into a feeling of oneness, when he would drop off the last vestige of distance, and his behaviour, consequently, would amount to more serious and shocking sacrilege. On these occasions he would be found to touch the various parts of his own body including his feet with a handful of flowers and Bael leaves and then offer them at the feet of the Mother.

Inscrutable are the ways of the madmen of God! Who is to plumb the depths of their mind and visualize the mysterious eddies and currents of divine love that make them talk, act and move about in a strange rhythm, trampling outrageously upon the entire body of codes and formulas of conventional life? They belong absolutely to a different plane. The shackles of our society are not meant for them. They have thoroughly fulfilled and eventually outgrown the need of regulations. Unlike the waters of a canal hedged in, controlled and directed by human will, their lives, filled with the nectar of divine love, roll on triumphantly in the boundless and awe-inspiring majesty of the mighty sea.

Yet, in the eyes of the ordinary men of the world, who are hopelessly ignorant of the mysterious beats of these pure hearts, any unaccountable breach of a set rule of life appears very naturally like an unmistakable symptom of lunacy. In their Pharisaical opinion, a priest's violation of the set code of worship and of the ordinary sense of propriety surely amounts to a sacril-

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ege, and this obviously cannot proceed from anything except complete derangement of the mind. If the multitude of spiritual dunces could have their own way, they would have put every one of the world's seers, saints and prophets in the strait waistcoat. As a matter of fact, when they actually usurped the right of sitting in judgement over the conduct of one of these madmen of God, they went the length of nailing him on the cross.

There is, however, even in the common walks of society, another set of men who have the eyes to see, behind the extraordinary behaviour of the God-intoxicated souls, the dizzy heights of their spiritual consciousness. They are drawn to the Godmen almost by a magnetic attraction, and they consider it a privilege to be able to serve them, shelter them and protect them from the fury of the nagging formalists.

Rani Rasmani, the proprietress of the temple, and her son-in-law and right-hand man, Mathur Babu, came like such protecting angels to the rescue of the young priest when his so-called sacrilegious behaviour had infuriated the fastidious officials of the temple. But for the unbounded reverence of these two pious persons, Ramakrishna would, perhaps, have been mobbed by the temple-staff. These two privileged souls saw through his divine madness and felt instinctively that his strange method of worship proceeded from a genuine and extraordinarily profound love for the Divine Mother. Perhaps they went a step farther and saw in and through his perplexing acts a play of the divine will of

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the Mother. One day, while Rani Rasmani was listening to the ecstatic songs of Ramakrishna within the temple, her mind wandered far off and busied itself in spinning the web of a pending lawsuit. Immediately she was taken aback to find herself slapped by the audacious young priest for her want of attention. She sat abashed like a guilty young girl before her reproving teacher. She felt as if the Divine Mother herself had punished her to illumine her heart. Hence, far from penalizing the young priest for his apparently grave misconduct, the wealthy proprietress of the temple humbly accepted the chastisement as a necessary and well-deserved treatment for the vagaries of her mind, and she took prompt steps to see that the temple-staff did not hurt his sentiments even by mentioning the incident to him.

Soon, however, Ramakrishna found it physically impossible to attend to the normal duties of the chief priest of the temple. His mind was on the wings of ecstasy; it revelled perpetually in soaring high above the sense plane, and hence it refused to be chained any longer to any punctilious demand of the world. Moreover, his nerves were on the edge; he could not stand the worries involved in priestly duties and required rest. He spoke out his mind to Mathur Babu, who gracefully accepted his suggestion and permitted his nephew, Hriday, to act as his substitute for a while. Thus laying aside the burden of official responsibilities, he breathed freely for some time and followed, without any let or hindrance, the spiritual bent of his mind.

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About this time, with the help of Hriday, he had the wild place about the Āmalakī tree cleared up and got four other holy trees planted there, in order to prepare a suitable place for his spiritual practices. It was on a raised platform under this group of umbrageous trees that Ramakrishna practised most of his spiritual courses during the subsequent period of his life. This place is now known as the Pañchavaṭī or the grove of the five trees, and is held in great regard by the pilgrims visiting the Dakshineswar temple.

During this period, when Ramakrishna's mind without a pilot was careering madly through the ocean of spiritual ecstasy, the vision of Kālī alone could not set it at rest. He wanted to see God in other forms. The ravenous hunger of his soul was not to be appeased by realizing only one particular aspect of God. For a time he was mad after seeing God as Rāma, whom he had worshipped in his early days in his village home as the tutelary deity of his family. Rāmachandra, the legendary Kshatriya king of Ayodhyā, is worshipped to this day by countless Hindus as an Incarnation of God. As soon as he was drawn towards this divine ideal, his plastic mind got itself moulded completely after Hanumān, the "monkey" chieftain and the greatest devotee of Rāma. He identified himself thoroughly with the pious ape-man and began to eat, drink and jump about on trees like him, with the name of Raghuvīra constantly on his lips. At the end of this strange spiritual practice, he was blessed with a vision of the peerless consort of Rāma, Sītā, who has been held by Hindu

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women as the ideal of chastity through thousands of years.

One day when he was sitting alone in the place now known as Pañchavaṭī in quite a normal frame of mind, he observed a lady with an extraordinarily sublime countenance approaching him from the northern end of the temple garden, and looking graciously upon him all the while. He was wide awake ; he saw her as plainly as he saw the Ganges, the trees, in fact, everything about him. There was nothing in the comely human form of the lady to mark her out as a goddess, except, of course, the unusual sublimity in her look and deportment. He began to wonder who she might be, when, suddenly, a monkey jumped down from a neighbouring tree with a cry of joy and sat affectionately by her side. At once an idea flashed within him that the lady was none other than Sītā. Goose-flesh started all over his body, and he was about to fall at her feet addressing her as Mother, when he found, to his utter surprise, that she entered mysteriously into his body and disappeared. Before making her thrilling exit she told him cryptically, "I bequeath my smile unto you."

Ramakrishna's health, however, became a matter of grave concern to his friends and well-wishers. Severe strain due to continued spiritual exercise and ecstasy for about three years at a stretch had told seriously upon his health. He had absolutely no sleep and went almost without food. His entire nervous system appeared to be on fire. He would feel a burning sensa-

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tion all over his body, and sometimes minute drops of blood would ooze out through the pores of his skin. Had it not been for the affectionate care-taking of his nephew Hriday, it would perhaps have been impossible for him to keep his body and soul together. Mathur Babu was moved to see his physical sufferings and very kindly placed him under the treatment of a reputed physician of Calcutta. But this failed to heal him. In their anxiety for his failing health, Rani Rasmani and Mathur Babu were led imprudently to think that a break of his rigid continence might prove beneficial to him. With this idea they tried twice to trap him on the sly with hired women of ill fame. On both occasions it failed to make any impression on his mind. They were dumbfounded to see that as soon as he saw the women and scented danger, Ramakrishna, like a simple child, rushed into the secure arms of his Divine Mother, breaking off altogether from his physical consciousness. Both these sincere well-wishers of the young priest, together with the agents of their perfectly well-intentioned but foolish design, realized the folly of their attempt and became exceedingly ashamed and stricken with remorse. When the ordeals were over and Ramakrishna came out unscathed, the faith of Rasmani and her son-in-law in their young priest as a genuine and rare lover of God went beyond all bounds. Trying all possible remedies and failing to bring him round, they ultimately sent him down to his village home for a while, thinking that a change of environment might improve his health.

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Some time in the year 1859 he was back to his native village Kamarpukur. Here also his impetuous mind, heedless of its new surroundings, kept itself steadfastly on the spiritual track. He would retire at night to the neighbouring cremation ground and practise severe austerities. His relatives thought that he was mad. His mother became sorely worried to find him in that state of physical prostration and probable mental derangement. She tried all possible and available remedies. Even she went the length of calling in an exorcist to see if her son was possessed.

However, after a few months' stay in the village he pulled himself together a little and began to behave like a normal man. His restlessness subsided and he ceased to weep, though he did not give up his nocturnal sallies to the cremation ground for meditation. Somehow his relatives got used to his way of life. Still his mother was pained to see her son, a young man of twenty-three, hopelessly indifferent to all worldly concerns. She surmised that marriage, perhaps, might bring a change upon his mind. Curiously enough, Ramakrishna, in his simplicity, readily agreed to the proposal of marriage. His mother and his surviving elder brother, Rameswar, forthwith went about hunting the neighbourhood for a suitable bride. Finding them exhausted in their search, Ramakrishna, in a mood of self-absorption, told them one day that his future mate was waiting for him in the house of Ram Chandra Mukhopadhyaya of Jayrambati. They hesitated to take him at his word; yet they made an

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enquiry and were surprised when they discovered in the specified house Ram Chandra's daughter, Saradamani, a little girl of five years. Both parties agreed, and within a few days Saradamani was wedded ceremoniously to Ramakrishna. Moderners will probably be shocked to hear of such a fantastic marriage of a youth of twenty-three with a girl of five. But child-marriage among the Hindus is nothing more than a formal religious ceremony tying two souls together, and it remains unconsummated until after puberty. Hence it may be looked upon as a sort of betrothal that is in vogue among the peoples of the West. In the case of Ramakrishna, moreover, the question does not arise at all. His marriage was, to all intents and purposes, simply a spiritual union of souls, and it remained so till the end of his life. No thought of flesh ever crept up to soil the divine love of this supernormal couple.

After the marriage was over, Ramakrishna stayed on in his village home for about a year and a half; then he returned to Dakshineswar and again took charge of the worship of the Divine Mother.

The Divine Mother had been waiting for him. As soon as he crossed the threshold, she swooped down upon him like a whirlwind and plunged him again into a frenzy of spiritual intoxication. Again did start with redoubled vigour the mad career of his hungry soul. Piteous cries for the Mother began once more to rend the sky. Ecstatic fits started racking his nerves. Strange visions soothed and consoled him in

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the hours of meditation. During this period he almost forgot the existence of his body. He left it practically unattended for months; his hair grew long and got matted with dust and dirt. When he would sit stock-still in meditation, birds, mistaking his motionless body for an inert substance, would actually perch on his head and even peck into his matted hair in search of food.

By the light of his naive discrimination he made a vigorous search of his mind and uprooted from it, with a strong hand, whatever appeared to stand between him and his Divine Mother. And the process was strikingly original. In order to banish from his heart any possible attachment to wealth he hit upon the following expedient: Taking a few silver coins in one hand and a handful of earth in the other, he would argue that money was no better than earth. Far from helping one towards spiritual realization, it gave rise to arrogance and desires for sense-enjoyment. Hence it was as useless as a handful of dust. Thus cogitating he would mix up the coins and the earth and throw them both in the water of the Ganges. He repeated this process several times till he felt that his renunciation of wealth was complete. To root out caste-prejudice and all ideas of superiority, he washed, for a time, the latrines of Pariahs with his own hand, wiping the floors with his long hair. To maintain the unsullied purity of his mind he scrupulously avoided the company of women and also of impure and worldly-minded men.

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Such was the indomitable strength of his will that whatever he rejected from his mind in this way became gall and wormwood even to the nerves and muscles of his body. This is why, during the rest of his life, the lightest touch of a woman would generally give rise to excruciating physical pain, contact with an impure man would shock his nerves terribly, and even the simple touch of a coin would immediately throw the muscles of his hand into agonizing cramps. His body was perfectly attuned to his highly spiritual mind, and it could never go, with impunity, against his severe vows of renunciation.

His austerities during this period told seriously upon his health. He himself described very graphically how his body had come to the verge of ruin at this time: "An ordinary man would not be able to bear a fraction of that tremendous fervour; his body would be shattered by a quarter of that emotion. I could forget my indescribable pangs only by seeing the Mother in some form or other for the greater part of the day and night. Otherwise this body could not have survived. For six years these eyes remained wide open, not a wink of sleep visited them. I could not close the eyelids, however much I might try to do so. I had no idea of time, nor of the body. When the mind, at rare intervals, came down to a lower plane and I had a faint idea of the body, a shudder of pain would pass through me at the thought that I was going mad. Standing before a mirror I would put my finger into my eyes to see if the eyelids would close,

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but they would not. Horrified, I would often burst into tears and pray, 'Mother, is this the result of praying and of wholly surrendering myself unto Thee? Ah! Thou hast visited me with a fell disease!' But the next moment I would say, 'Let it be as Thou wishest. Let this body go to pieces, but leave me not.....Thou art my only refuge. I have taken shelter at Thy lotus feet.' As I prayed thus, my mind would again be stimulated, this body would seem a trifle, not worth thinking about, and the blissful Mother would appear before me and console me with her gracious words."

These words really burn in one's mind a picture of the physical as well as the mental condition of the young priest during this period. His body literally became a mass of ruins. The burning sensation all over his body, oozing of blood through the pores of his skin and violent spasms on his different limbs, together with complete sleeplessness and want of appetite, appeared once again with increased virulence. His life was jeopardized, and his friends in dismay placed him once more under medical treatment, which, however, proved as ineffective as befofe.

Thus riding over the rough sea without a pilot, Ramakrishna, no doubt, discerned and frequently touched the blissful shores of Beatitude, but this mad voyage cost him his physical well-being. His health was shattered by this hazardous adventure beyond all hopes of repair. Ordinary medical treatment had been tried and it failed. Physicians could not even diagnose the

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real nature of his malady; perhaps it was beyond the scope of the medical science. Common folks about him misunderstood his symptoms and thought that he was mad. His friends and well-wishers racked their brains to unearth the right remedy for his ailments. Even Ramakrishna himself, as we have seen, sometimes doubted his own sanity and became much disconcerted to see the abnormal state of his body. There was no one near him who could throw any light on the case and avert the impending physical crisis.

As his sufferings sprang out of his severe austerities and exalted spiritual moods, none but spiritual adepts could see through these and bring him round by prescribing proper remedies. A competent spiritual guide alone could help him out of the impasse. He required some one who could harness his impetuous mind, train and direct his ecstasies according to the recipes of Yogic science, and thus eventually cure him also of his physical troubles. He had not to wait long when such a spiritual guide came and taking him gently by the hand led him out of the unknown troubled zone on to the calmer waters along the beaten tracks of spiritual practice. With the advent of this guide he stepped into the second phase of his spiritual quest.

ON BEATEN TRACKS

Tāntrika Sādhanā: One day in or about 1862, a fairly tall and handsome lady alighted from a country boat at the foot of the bathing ghat and

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walked up to the terrace of the Dakshineswar temple. She was on the right side of forty ; her long dishevelled hair and saffron robe indicated that she was a Bhairavī, a female ascetic of the Tāntrika school. On enquiry she was found to be such a wandering nun. She possessed extensive knowledge of the Tāntrika lore and Bhakti scriptures, as well as considerable experience of practical religion. She hailed from one of the eastern districts of Bengal and was a Brāhmin by birth.

She was out in search of a particular blessed soul to whom she had been commissioned by God, in a vision, to deliver a message. At the very first sight she was thrilled to recognize in Ramakrishna the favoured child of God she had been looking for, and she engulfed him forthwith in her motherly affection.

Like a drowning man lighting upon a life-buoy, Ramakrishna was filled with hope and joy at the sight of the Bhairavī, who appeared to him to be a god-send capable of rescuing him out of the depths of his physical and mental anguish. He hailed her with delight and returned her affection with filial devotion. He laid bare before her his aching heart and sought her care and counsel like a helpless child. He told her everything about the severe austerities he had gone through, directed solely by his own untutored mind, the various visions and ecstasies he had experienced, and the terrible sufferings that had been racking his body for a long time.

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From Ramakrishna's narrative the Bhairavī realized, to her utter surprise, that it was *mahābhāva,* or the highest phase of ecstatic love for God, that he had been passing through, and that it was this exalted spiritual state that lay at the root of all his physical troubles. She consulted the holy texts, compared notes and was bewildered with joy to discover that Ramakrishna's experiences coincided on all points with the ecstatic moods of Śrī Rādhā and Śrī Chaitanya. Even his physical ailments tallied completely with the physical symptoms of *mahābhāva* as described in the sacred books. All these convinced the Bhairavī of the fact that she had at last come upon a person who did really rank with the exceptionally rare souls figuring in the spiritual history of the Hindus as Incarnations of Divinity.

In order to allay Ramakrishna's anxiety she told him all she thought about him and his phenomenal experiences. She made it clear to him that he was not an ordinary victim of a mere pathological disorder, but that his intense physical sufferings were the invariable consequences of the highest phase of love for God, which had been reached only by a privileged few before him.

She demonstrated the truth of her statement by healing almost miraculously some of the terrible symptoms of Ramakrishna's strange malady by very simple and curious methods according to the directions laid down in the holy texts. For instance, she completely cured his virulent burning sensation within

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three days simply by putting garlands of scented flowers about his neck and anointing his body with the aromatic paste of sandalwood. The scriptural recipe for allaying the physical symptoms of *mahā-bhāva* was thus tried by the Bhairavī and found exceedingly effective. This, surely, appeared to be a perfectly scientific corroboration of her proposition.

She did not halt here. She had an assembly of devotees and scholars, well versed in Vaishṇava and Tāntrika literature, called at Dakshineswar. Before this assembly she recounted the mental and physical states of Ramakrishna, compared these with relevant descriptions in the scriptures, and proved up to the hilt her finding that Ramakrishna was an Incarnation of God. The assembly accepted her verdict without demur; she carried the day. This was followed by another meeting, which also upheld the Bhairavī's views about Ramakrishna. Vaishnav Charan, a great scholar, devotee and leader of a Vaishṇava sect and Pundit Gauri Kanta Tarkabhushana, a vastly erudite devotee of the Tāntrika school, require a passing mention in this connection. Both of them were present in the second assembly held at Dakshineswar, the former having been present also in the first meeting. Both subscribed heartily to the Bhairavī's views regarding Ramakrishna's spiritual status.

The unanimous verdict of the assembled scholars and devotees created a profound impression upon all present. The madman appeared in a new light; lunacy merged in Divinity! A thrill of awe and

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wonder passed through the hearts of the temple inmates. Ramakrishna, however, in his simplicity, after taking usual permission from his Divine Mother, placed himself completely in the hands of the Bhairavī. He had already received Tāntrika initiation from one Kenaram Bhattacharya, and now he wanted the Bhairavī to lead him through spiritual practices according to the directions of Tāntrika texts. She gladly accepted the charge.

According to the requirement of Tāntrika practices two *āsanas,* or specially sacred seats, were prepared, one in the Pañchavaṭī and the other at the northern end of the temple garden under a Bael tree. The Bhairavī used to collect the various rare ingredients necessary for different Tāntrika rites and arrange them on either of the sacred seats, where Ramakrishna would retire at night and perform the rites according to her direction. In this way she put him through all the spiritual exercises mentioned in the sixty-four principal Tantras.

These Tantras present practical methods of realizing the ultimate truth preached by Vedānta, namely, the essential unity of the devotee's soul with God. But unlike the path of knowledge prescribed by monistic Vedānta for realizing this fundamental oneness, the Tāntrika method, a marvellous combination of *yoga* and *karma,* is characterized by rituals. Through contemplation of God in concrete forms and performance of ceremonial worship, Tāntrika *sādhanā* provides a graded course of tuning up the naive mind of the

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devotee. He is enjoined to meditate on his oneness with the formless Absolute and then to think that out of the formless Impersonal God emerge both his own self and the distinct and living form of a goddess whom he is to place before him through imagination and worship as the Divine Mother.

The path pointed out by this branch of Hinduism is an easy gradient ascending from the grossest sense-plane up to the dizzy heights of the Absolute. Hence it is suited to men of all stages of spiritual evolution. Different groups of spiritual exercises are prescribed for the 'brute-man' steeped in *tamas* or lethargy, the 'heroic man' abounding in *rajas* or energy and desires, as also the 'divine man' full of *sattva*, that is, calmness, purity, contentment and clear vision.

The Tāntrika rites place before the devotee objects of sense-enjoyment and then require him to deify these by his thought and gradually to sublimate, by this process, his sense-attraction into love for God. For instance, certain rites require the presence of the opposite sex in poses of direct sense-appeal; but the devotee is wanted to curb his carnal desires by looking upon them as sacred manifestations of the Divine Mother. In this way, one is required to conquer one's flesh and prepare one's mind for spiritual realization, not by avoiding temptations like the *jñāna-yogin* or the spiritual aspirant on the path of knowledge, but by boldly facing and overcoming them.

Hence some of these practices are extremely dangerous. Bristling with snares and pitfalls for the

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sensual man, the precipitous path of the Tantras is hazardous to tread. An unwary devotee may at any moment miss his footing and tumble down headlong into the yawning chasm of moral depravity. By the grace of his Divine Mother, however, Ramakrishna passed through the entire course without flinching an iota from his ideal of motherhood in all women, and without even partaking of wine, so commonly associated with Tāntrika practice. After going through the necessary rituals every night, as soon as he would begin to tell his beads, he would invariably find himself overwhelmed with divine fervour and immediately fall into a deep trance. Sense-appeals could never overtake his soaring mind. No swerving, no deviation could disturb even for a moment his upward march. And it is no less surprising that he did not take more than three days to attain success in any of the prescribed exercises.

He felt very tangibly the effects of Tāntrika *sādhanā*. During this period he had quite a multitude of wonderful visions that followed one another in quick succession. He saw innumerable goddesses corresponding exactly with their descriptions in the scriptures. Some of them talked to him and advised him in various ways. It may be interesting to mention that of all the divine forms, Shoḍaśī or Rājarājeśvarī appeared to him to be the loveliest. One day he visualized the symbol of creation as a vast luminous triangle out of which were emerging hundreds of worlds. On another occasion he saw with wide open

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eyes a mysterious pantomime symbolizing the acts of creation, preservation and destruction carried on by the inscrutable cosmic power, *māyā*: An exquisitely beautiful lady came quietly out of the Ganges, gave birth to a child and went on fondling and nursing it for a while; then suddenly assuming a terrible pose, she started to crush the little babe between her jaws, after which she disappeared in the river. During this period he perceived the upward march of the *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, described in the Yoga and Tāntrika scriptures as the coiled up divine energy lying normally in every man at the lower end of the spinal canal. When it is made to rise farther up by spiritual practice, its progress through the different stages is marked by distinct phases of spiritual experience on the part of the devotee, culminating in mergence in the Absolute. Besides, the sacred texts describe five different rhythms in which the *kuṇḍalinī* moves on different occasions. Ramakrishna verified the scriptural statements by experiencing all the five different rhythms and also all the various spiritual moods and visions corresponding to the different stages of ascent of the coiled-up divine energy.

Moreover, by virtue of the Tāntrika practices he obtained the eight-fold *siddhis* or supernatural powers as described in the sacred books. But by the grace of his Divine Mother, he learnt to spurn these as trash. His body became absolutely free from all ailments and looked as bright as gold. People began to stare at his lovely appearance, and he had actually to wrap himself in a

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stout sheet to keep off public gaze. He even prayed to the Divine Mother to take back his outward beauty.

His unique success in Tāntrika practices without any material connection with wine or sex has undoubtedly restored the purity of these ancient practices and stamped them afresh as a sure and distinct approach to the realization of God.

Vaishṇava Sādhanā: Ramakrishna took about three years to go through the entire course of Tāntrika practices. These enriched him, as we have seen, with numerous visions and spiritual attainments, a fraction of which would surely have satisfied an ordinary soul. Yet his craving for God-realization did not abate in the least. The intrepid and tireless seeker of God was bent upon trying almost every road and alley leading to the mastery of spiritual truths and beatific bliss. His insatiable hunger spurred him on to feast upon all the different forms and aspects in which God is meditated upon and worshipped by different sects of Hindu devotees.

Immediately after he had come to the end of the path of the Tantras, his mind was drawn irresistibly to approach God through the avenue of Vaishṇavism. Born in a family devoted to the worship of Raghuvīra (an Incarnation of Vishṇu), he had imbibed in his early days a strong inclination for this cult. Moreover, his spiritual guide, the Bhairavī, though well-versed and firmly grounded in Tāntrika lore and practice, happened to be a Vaishṇava devotee at heart. Her chosen ideal also was Raghuvīra, whose emblem she

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carried with her and worshipped every day with great devotion. Besides, her motherly attitude towards Ramakrishna, whom she treated as her Gopāla or child Kṛishṇa, reflected much of genuine Vaishṇavism. All these, perhaps, combined to attract him towards a systematic practice of this cult.

The path of the Vaishṇavas is exclusively a path of *bhakti* or love. It teaches the devotee to purify his mind by developing, on suggested lines, a very strong love for God, and then to remain immersed in the pure and ecstatic bliss of God-vision and divine love, as the very goal of this path. The followers of this school do not want to step out of their individual ego and become merged in the Impersonal God, which the travellers on the path of knowledge call *mukti* or salvation, and consider to be the consummation of all forms of spiritual practice.

The Vaishṇavas look upon *parā bhakti* or supreme love for God as the end itself. The fountain of this love exists in every human heart; only one has to open it up by purifying one's mind and diverting it from the objects of the sense-world to God. The novitiate, therefore, is required to cleanse his heart thoroughly by creating an intense longing for God through regular and methodical worship, hymns, prayers, repetition of *mantras* and constant meditation on the Personal God. Kṛishṇa and Rāmachandra are the favourite ideals of the two major Vaishṇava sects.

For developing one's love for God, Vaishṇavism prescribes a perfectly natural method consisting in

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humanizing God, to a certain extent, and deifying the devotee. The chosen Ideal is to be looked upon as one's parent, master, friend, child or sweetheart, and these attitudes or *bhāvas* are known respectively as *śānta, dāsya, sakhya, vātsalya* and *madhura*. Each of these attitudes, followed up faithfully, can lead one to the goal of blessedness.

As we have seen, Ramakrishna's untutored mind had already scaled the heights of Vaishṇavism through the first two attitudes—by his devotion to Kālī as his mother and to Rāmachandra as his master. Subsequently he also developed to perfection the *sakhya* attitude. So now he had only two modes of Vaishṇava discipline left, namely, *vātsalya* and *madhura*. Towards the first of these his mind was swayed immediately after the Tāntrika practices, probably by the motherly attitude of the Bhairavī towards him.

About this time, Jatadhari, an itinerant Vaishṇava monk and a master of the parental attitude towards God, made his appearance at Dakshineswar. He was a devotee of Rāma and looked upon him as his child. He had with him a metal image of Rāmlālā, or child Rāma, that he nursed, fed, played with and even put to bed at night. After a long course of practice along this line he had already reached the end of his spiritual journey and had been passing his days in the ecstatic bliss of a constant vision of his divine Child with his naked eyes. With his beloved Rāmlālā throbbing with life and clinging to him like a pet child, he had been making a tour of pilgrimage through the sacred places

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of India, and it was in the course of this tour that he halted for a while at the Dakshineswar temple.

Though Jatadhari had told nobody about his mystic experience and cherished it, obviously, as the most precious secret of his life, Ramakrishna read his heart like an open book. He became a blessed spectator of the divine drama enacted before his eyes by Rāmlālā and his devotee-parent. Every day he began to observe with keen interest how Rāmlālā talked, behaved and played his childish tricks with Jatadhari. Gradually Ramakrishna realized that the divine Child was getting more and more attached to him and even preferring his company to that of Jatadhari.

At this, Ramakrishna's parental emotions surged up towards Rāmlālā, and he began right away to caress, bathe, feed and sport with him. They became so natural that he would not feel any scruple even to chastise the divine Child when he was naughty. Of course, immediately after such harsh treatment his tender mind would bleed with remorse and compassion for his little unruly darling.

Thus getting Rāmachandra as his own son, Ramakrishna began to spend his days on one of the least accessible heights of Vaishṇava *sādhanā*. Very few people, indeed, dare to strip God of all His glories and to look upon Him as their child waiting helplessly for their nursing and care-taking. And of these again only a microscopic minority can walk up to the height of spiritual realization on this line. With his per-

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fectly purified mind filled already with supreme love for God, Ramakrishna had just to turn his steps and begin to pace right on the summit of *vātsalya bhāva.* Rāmlālā became so dear to him that he could not bear his separation even for a moment. Curiously enough, Rāmlālā also grew so very fond of him that he was loath to part with him. Meanwhile, Jatadhari had his cup of bliss filled to the brim, and perceived that he had no longer any need of ceremonial worship. So on the eve of his exit from Dakshineswar he had absolutely no pang in his heart to fulfil the desire of his beloved Child, who insisted on staying on with the priest of Kālī. And while bidding farewell, he cheerfully handed over to Ramakrishna the metal image of Rāmlālā, whose living form he henceforth carried in his bosom.

After a short period, however, the *madhura bhāva* or the ecstatic emotions of a sweetheart, came upon his mind with a terrific rush and swept it away. He looked upon himself as one of the legendary Gopīs or milkmaids of Vṛindāvana, racked by the terrible pangs of separation from their supreme lover, Kṛishṇa. He fixed himself up in the pose of a Gopī and began to dress, talk, behave and move about like a faithful young woman sorely distressed by her lover's indifference. He went almost mad in his passionate love for his divine sweetheart. Kṛishṇa, however, went on playing his old tricks with him, just as he had done with the Gopīs. He captivated his mind, made it wild with love, and delighted in adding fuel to the

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fire of this all-consuming passion by keeping himself, all the while, at an inaccessible distance. Kṛishṇa's cruelty stabbed him and he felt as much distressed as the Gopīs. The pangs of separation became unbearable and the frenzy of a forlorn lover was upon him. He gave up food, sleep, in fact all contacts with the outer world, and urged by his burning passion, roamed ceaselessly in his spiritual dreamland in a mad pursuit of his wily lover. His intense mental anguish and severe austerities brought back his old physical sufferings. The burning sensation all over his body, oozing of blood through the pores of his skin, and almost complete cessation of physiological functions during ecstatic fits visited him for the third time and brought him again to the limit of physical endurance. Thus Ramakrishna represented in flesh and blood a complete portrait, found in the Vaishṇava scriptures, of Śrī Rādhā, who among the Gopīs displayed through her *mahābhāva* the acme of conjugal love for Kṛishṇa.

After he had passed for a few months through this terrible ordeal of disappointed love for Kṛishṇa, he, however, was blessed one day with a vision of Rādhā, the peerless exemplar of the *madhura bhāva*, and verily the queen of the Gopīs of Vṛindāvana. Rādhā with her golden complexion and heavenly beauty appeared before him, drew close to him and vanished mysteriously in his body, leaving him engulfed in an ecstatic fit. For a period after this he remained identified with Rādhā, and all the psychic as well as physical symptoms of her *mahābhāva*

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became manifest in him before the wondering gaze of the Bhairavī, Vaishnav Charan and other learned devotees.

A few days after this he came to the end of this heart-rending love episode. The curtain suddenly rose, Śrī Kṛishṇa with his soul-enthralling grace appeared, walked up to him and merged in his person. His mad yearning was thus set at rest, and his heart became full of divine bliss. The thrill of the vision kept him spell-bound for a period of three months, during which he would always see Kṛishṇa in himself and in everything about him, sentient or insentient.

One day, while he was listening to the reading of the *Bhāgavata* in the hall of the temple of Rādhākānta, he had a significant vision. In an ecstatic mood he saw Śrī Kṛishṇa in his resplendent beauty standing before him, and observed that luminous rays emanating from his lotus-feet touched the *Bhāgavata* and then his own chest, thus linking up for a while the holy trinity—God, the scriptures and His devotee. He became convinced by this vision that these three apparently distinct entities were identical in essence.

Thus did Ramakrishna scale the last and the most inaccessible height of Vaishṇava *sādhanā* where the devotee experiences the unique rapture of uniting permanently with God as His sweetheart.

Advaita Sādhanā: Ramakrishna came practically to the end of the path of love, or *bhakti mārga*. This was the path that his unguided mind had chosen quite

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at the beginning of his spiritual quest. Through briers and hedges, ditches and pitfalls, he had rushed frantically till with bleeding feet and aching body he had reached Kālī, the Divine Mother and Sītā, the divine consort of Rāma. Under the worthy lead of the Bhairavī he had travelled on the same road of love characterized specially by Tāntrika ceremonials. This had led him, as we have seen, to come in close contact with the Cosmic Power behind the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe through concrete and living forms of various goddesses and also through a number of symbolical visions. Jatadhari with his Rāmlālā, also, had conducted him up the same road of love to the peak of parental bliss. And the road practically ended when he climbed up the dizzy heights of *madhura bhāva*.

Thus did he cover the entire range of dualistic realizations, through which the blessed devotee is united with the Personal God in a bond of ecstatic love. God, the Supreme Ruler of the universe, did actually appear before him as his Mother, Master, Playmate, Child and Lover. In various forms and with distinct names He caressed him, instructed him, sported with him, and sometimes became merged in him. Since the beginning of his mad quest in 1856 up to the end of 1864, for a period of nearly nine years, he had been thinking of nothing but God in one or other of His divine aspects, and the bulk of this period he had spent in the living presence of the Personal God with different names and different forms.

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A drop of the nectar of divine love is enough to slake the parched throats of the common run of spiritual aspirants, drown for ever their sorrows and worldly troubles and steep their minds permanently in peace ineffable. Such is the potency of divine love! Hence it takes one's breath away to imagine how Ramakrishna remained literally immersed in a limitless sea of this love and drank freely and profusely out of it according to his pleasure.

Yet he was not permitted to cry halt even at this staggering height of his 'great journey.' His Divine Mother spurred him on to proceed farther and appease for ever his ravenous hunger by realizing the identity of his own soul with the Final Cause of the universe, God Impersonal. The idea of separation between himself and God that had often become so very painful to him was to be banished for good by the transcendental experience of absolute oneness. His ego, though attenuated and chastened to perfection, still stood like a transparent shell marking him out with the distinct rôle of the subject from the rest of the universe appearing as the eternal object of experience. This ego was to be cast aside, all barriers in the shape of time, space and causation were to be smashed, and the entire plane of duality characterized by subject-object relations was to be transcended, so that nothing of the phenomenal existence might remain to differentiate him from the unconditioned and unmanifested Absolute, or Nirguṇa Brahman as It is named in Advaita Vedānta. Just like a salt-doll dis-

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solving completely in the water of the sea, his own self was to feel its essential oneness with the Nirguṇa Brahman by getting itself merged completely in the infinite and formless ocean of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. The Divine Mother had her eyes upon him; she would not give him rest till he stepped out of the plane of duality leaving behind even all his rapturous dreams, visions and ecstasies centring round the Personal God. She commanded him to follow the Vedāntic guide who appeared on the scene at this psychological moment, and to plunge like a salt-doll in the ocean of the Impersonal God.

The new spiritual guide was Tota Puri, an itinerant monk of the Vedānta school, who halted one day towards the end of 1864 at the Dakshineswar temple, in the course of his long tour of pilgrimage. He hailed from the Punjab and was just back from the sacred places, Puri and Gangasagar, the estuary of the Ganges. After forty years of patient practice, according to the directions of Advaita Vedānta, he had already burst through the bondage of illusion and realized his essential oneness with the Absolute. Endowed with a sturdy physique, a stern mind and an admantine will, this liberated soul was roaming about the country like a lion. He was an out-and-out monist believing in the Nirguṇa Brahman or the Absolute as the only truth, and looking upon everything within creation as nothing more than an illusory appearance. And he had scant regard for any such phantasy. He had no soft corner in his heart even

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for the Personal God, who in his perspective was after all only an appearance and not reality. Naturally he would smile with disdain at the sight of any type of dualistic *sādhanā*. Ceremonial worship, prayers, hymns, repetition of holy name before images of gods and goddesses appeared to him to be no more than kindergarten exercises for infant pupils of the spiritual school. In the effusions of love for the Personal God he would see the misdirected zeal of superstitious devotees revolving aimlessly on the merry-go-round of illusion. The only thing that a spiritual aspirant was required to do was, according to him, to break through the magic circle and put an end to all illusions. Hence his belief was clamped to renunciation of the world, discrimination between appearance and reality, and meditation on the essential identity of one's self with the Supreme Brahman, because these alone could help one transcend the illusory plane of names and forms and realize its essential oneness with the formless and unconditioned Absolute. He believed in this kind of *sādhanā*, the path of knowledge prescribed by Advaita Vedānta, and in nothing else.

With such a heroic mould of life and thoughts, Tota Puri appeared on the scene, when Ramakrishna had passed barely three months to compose himself after reining his fiery mind at the last stage on the road of *bhakti*. Tota Puri found him seated on the portico in front of the Kālī temple. From his introspective look and self-absorbed mood Ramakrishna appeared to the august visitor as a man of rare

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spiritual attainments. Without any delay or hesitation, the Vedāntin monk volunteered to guide him on the path of knowledge. Ramakrishna said that he must seek the consent of his Mother before he could accept the offered help. He went in, and found that the Divine Mother had been waiting to give him the command. He came out with a beaming face, informed Tota Puri of his Mother's consent and accepted him as his fresh guide on the new road of his spiritual journey.

Tota Puri belonged to an order of monks that had been in existence for well over twelve centuries since its inauguration by Śrī Śaṅkarāchārya. According to the usage of this order, a novice has to be initiated into the all-renouncing life of *sannyāsa* or monasticism before he is permitted to step on to the road of knowledge. He has to cut himself off from his relatives, brush aside his entire past as a vanished dream, tear off all worldly ties of obligation and begin with *sannyāsa* an entirely new life of renunciation and spiritual freedom. Hence the first thing that Ramakrishna was required to do by his Vedāntin guide was to get himself initiated into this new life.

In a thatched hut close to the Pañchavaṭi used so long by Ramakrishna as his meditation room, he sat before his *guru* (teacher) on an auspicious day and went scrupulously through all the details of the *sannyāsa* ceremony. In lieu of the insignia of his Brāhminhood, his hair-tuft and sacred thread, which he had to burn in the sacred fire before him, he

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received from his preceptor a loin-cloth and an ochre robe as the holy badges of his new life. After the necessary rites were over he prostrated himself with profound reverence before his spiritual guide, who then proceeded to enlighten him with the knowledge of Advaita Vedānta.

One may almost visualize the scene how the tall, robust Punjabi monk addressed the extremely delicate, middle-statured Bengali disciple, and how the liberated soul poured out the contents of his mind into the depths of the humble and unassuming receiver before him. Little did Tota Puri realize at the time that the stream of knowledge that had appeared on the rocky heights of his adamantine mind was thus flowing down into the fathomless depth of the limitless sea.

However, he communicated to Ramakrishna's pure, concentrated and luminous mind the findings of the Advaita Vedānta that had been vitalized by his own realization. "The formless, limitless, eternal, uncaused and unconditioned Brahman alone is real. It is Absolute Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. And this is the only Reality. Everything else including one's body, mind and even ego is of the nature of illusory appearance. The entire phenomenal existence is only a fabric of illusion wrought by *avidyā* or Primal Ignorance. As soon as this *avidyā* is dispelled by right knowledge, the cosmic texture of time, space and causation melts into nothingness; what remains is the undivided Existence of Impersonal God, and with

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Him the *jñāna-yogin*, at this stage, realizes his absolute oneness. His body and mind cease functioning, and they do not respond to any test of life. To all onlookers, even to crucial physiological tests, he remains a corpse so long as this state lasts. This is the supersensuous and superconscious state, known technically as *nirvikalpa samādhi*, when the traveller on the road of knowledge reaches his goal of spiritual illumination by realizing his absolute identity with the Supreme Brahman, or the Absolute. One reaches this goal as soon as one sees through the illusory nature of the universe with the searchlight of his own discrimination under the direction of an illumined *guru*, and develops by constant renunciation and meditation an unshakable faith in his essential identity with Impersonal God."

Ramakrishna was asked by his *guru* to withdraw his mind from all sense-objects and meditate on the real and divine nature of his self. He detached his mind from the world in a trice, but the radiant and living form of his Divine Mother remained glued to his mind, and he could not shake it off in spite of his best efforts. In his despair he intimated his difficulty to his *guru*, who, however, was very firm and would not let him go at that. Instantly he pierced the space between his disciple's eyebrows with a piece of broken glass and commanded him sternly to concentrate his mind on that point. Ramakrishna made another desperate attempt, and this time he succeeded in cleaving into two the divine form of Kālī with the sword of discrimination. The last plank on which his

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mind had been resting was thus thrown off, and immediately it dived headlong into the fathomless depths of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. "The universe was extinguished. Space itself was no more. At first the shadows of ideas floated in the obscure depths of the mind. These melted away leaving a monotonous ticking of the consciousness of the ego. Then that too stopped. Nothing remained but Existence. The soul was lost in the Self. Dualism was blotted out. Beyond word and beyond thought, he attained Brahman."

For three days and three nights at a stretch he remained in this state, when his *guru* brought back the throbs of his life. Indeed Tota Puri was amazed to see that his disciple realized in one day what he himself had taken forty years to attain. The Vedāntin ascetic who would not spend more than three days in one place during his tour, was so much drawn to his wonderful disciple that he chose to spend eleven months on end in his company.

Immediately after Tota Puri had left the Dakshineshwar temple sometime in 1865, Ramakrishna's impetuous mind wanted to remain merged in the *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Soon his consciousness whisked past the realm of phenomena, which it scarcely revisited in the course of the next six months. Usually, the blessed few who have the rare privilege of spending only three weeks in this state do not return to the normal plane any more, and their bodies fall off like sere leaves. The salt-doll does not survive a sea-bath. It was, therefore, nothing short of a miracle that

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Ramakrishna did really come back to the *terra firma* after his six months' sojourn on the transcendental region of the Absolute. During this entire period not a sign of life could be discerned in his body except at long and rare intervals, and that too of very short duration. Even these rare intervals of returning consciousness would not come of themselves. A monk who chanced to come to the Dakshineswar temple at that time realized from the serene glow of the face what was going on within the apparently dead physical frame of Ramakrishna. He appeared on the scene just at the right moment, almost like a divine messenger, and set about preserving Ramakrishna's inert body. He felt that the absconding soul was destined to come back and do some mighty deeds for the benefit of the world. He, therefore, spared no pains in keeping the body intact. He would not hesitate even to beat it with a stick in order to bring down Ramakrishna's consciousness to the normal plane, so that some food might be thrust into his mouth. Sometimes these efforts of the monk would succeed to a certain extent, and a portion of the food pressed into the mouth would reach the stomach. This was how Ramakrishna's body survived the death-spell that continued for six months.

At the end of the period he received one day the command of his Divine Mother that he must remain on the threshold of relative consciousness for the sake of humanity. Immediately after that he had a terrible attack of dysentery with an excruciating pain in the

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stomach, which lasted for the following term of six months. The intense physical sufferings during this period gradually forced his mind back to the normal plane.

Thus did the unweary traveller practically gallop over the entire path of knowledge within the brief span of a single day, reach the transcendental realm of the Absolute and live there for six months at a stretch. When after leaping over the last barrier of relative existence and bursting through the prison of matter, his soul rested in the oneness of the Supreme Brahman, he had really nothing more to attain and practically came to the terminus of the road of religion. For through the long spell of the *nirvikalpa samādhi,* which is the highest flight of Advaita practice, the eternal substratum of Reality beneath the panoramic appearance of the universe became tangibly revealed to him. The Absolute, which is unknown and unknowable to the agnostic, became more than known to him, as he became one with it. Knowledge, knower and known dissolved in the ocean of one eternal Consciousness: birth, growth and death lost their meaning in that infinite Existence; love, lover and beloved became fused into one boundless realm of supreme and everlasting Bliss. Time was swallowed up in eternity. Space disappeared into nothingness. And causation became an absurdity. Regarding the positive contents of his experience, however, not a word can be said. They are beyond mind and beyond speech. He who has reached this blessed state alone

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knows these. But even he cannot transcribe this transcendental experience through the *māyā*-ridden scripts of the human mind. This is why Ramakrishna used to say that the Supreme Brahman could never be defiled by the touch of human lips. Even the Vedas, failing to describe Brahman, have only thrown suggestions about It.

However, when Ramakrishna became rather settled on the normal plane, his mind, towering above all delusions, kept on perceiving the magnificent unity behind the diversity of nature, and remained immersed in a constant stream of divine bliss. Like a master-artist he could now play alternately, at will, on both the strings of *bhakti* and *jñāna*. He could now say with a firm conviction: "When I think of the Supreme Being as inactive, neither creating nor preserving nor destroying, I call Him Brahman, or Purusha, the Impersonal God. When I think of Him as active, creating, preserving, destroying, I call Him Śakti, or Māyā, or Prakṛiti, the Personal God. But the distinction between them does not mean a difference. The Personal and the Impersonal are the same Being, like milk and its whiteness, or the diamond and its lustre, or the serpent and its undulations. It is impossible to conceive of the one without the other. The Divine Mother and Brahman are one." Moreover, he could now play with equal mastery also on the twin chords of *yoga* and *karma*, in which he had become an adept in the course of his Tāntrika practice. Evidently Hinduism had nothing more to teach him.

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ON ALIEN PATHS

Yet Ramakrishna remained as ever like a simple child in the presence of his Divine Mother. He had surrendered his will completely to her. She held the wire in her hand, pulled it at her will and made him move just as she liked. She had thrown him out on the tempestuous bosom of unknown seas, she had rushed him through all the familiar tracks trod by hundreds of Hindu seers, and by these means she had brought him already into living touch with every shade and aspect of spiritual truth and bliss. What more did she want to do with him? Immediately after his survey of the entire sea of Hindu *sādhanā* had been over, Ramakrishna felt the urge of exploring the foreign waters of non-Hindu faiths. His Divine Mother kept him on the move and impelled him to tread the alien paths of Islam and Christianity, one after the other.

Islam: Towards the end of 1866, when Ramakrishna had hardly picked up after the terrible attack of dysentery, his mind was drawn irresistibly towards Islam, and he ventured out immediately upon this alien path. In the temple garden he observed a devout Mussalman, whose earnest prayers, humility and absorbed mood convinced Ramakrishna of the fact that he was a seer of God. This was the immediate cause of his attraction towards him and his faith. The name of this person was Govinda Rai, which indicates his probable Hindu origin. Ramakrishna approached him and wanted to be initiated into Islam.

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After formal initiation his plastic mind was completely cast in the mould of Islam. He began to live outside the precincts of the temple like any of the non-Hindu visitors, and started dressing, dining, praying and behaving in every way like an orthodox Mussalman. All thoughts, visions and ecstasies associated with Hindu gods and goddesses vanished for the time being, and his pure mind like a tranquil lake wanted to mirror the truth behind Islamic thoughts. He went on repeating the name of Allah and reciting the *namaz* regularly like a devout Mohammedan fakir. His earnestness for realization and his zeal for devotion and contemplation according to the precepts of this new faith were unbounded. These perhaps sped him up in the path of Islam at a tremendous rate and brought him to the end of his journey after an incredibly short period of three days.

His arrival at the goal was marked by a vision, probably of the Prophet: a personage with a white beard and grave countenance approached him in his effulgent glory. Immediately he realized the Formless God with attributes as described in the Islamic scriptures, and then became merged in the Impersonal Gód, Brahman without attributes. Thus the path of Islam also led him up to the dizzy heights he had already scaled by his Advaita practice. The transcendental region of the Absolute, the One without a second, the Supreme Brahman beyond the pale of any differentiation, appears from Ramakrishna's experience to be the last halting place to which both the paths of Hinduism

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and Islam equally lead. Hence Advaita realization may reasonably be held to be the common ground between the two faiths, the common link that may be expected to bind together the two major communities of India and make them fraternize—when people will come to think about and realize the significance of Ramakrishna's experience on the sacred path of Islam.

Christianity: Nearly eight years after this, sometime in November, 1874, Ramakrishna was seized with a desire to see where the path of Christianity led to. His vast and varied experiences had made him by this time bold enough to travel on any road of religion without the help of a spiritual guide. All that he wanted was a map of the road. He wanted somebody who could acquaint him with the contents, the ideas and ideals of this new faith. And for meeting such a person he had to stir out of the Dakshineswar temple only by a few yards. Close by, a rich and enlightened Hindu, named Shambhu Charan Mullick, of Calcutta, came to live occasionally in his spacious garden-house. Acquaintance was followed by friendship, and at his request Shambhu Charan began to read out the Bible to him. Ramakrishna eagerly imbibed all that he heard about Christ. The wonderfully pure and beatific life of Jesus fascinated him, and he was caught.

Shortly afterwards, while sitting in the parlour of another neighbouring garden-house belonging to Jadu Nath Mullick, Ramakrishna had an occasion to feel what this attraction meant to him and how helplessly

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he had been entrapped by his devotion to the wonderful life of Christ. He was looking at the portraits on the wall. Among these he discovered a picture representing the Madonna with the baby Christ in her arms. His eyes became pinned to this. Instantly the holy figures appeared to be warmed into life; he observed that they were radiating rays of light that pierced his flesh and went straight to his heart. Immediately his love and regard for Christ and the ideal represented by him grew up to the size of a huge avalanche and began to crush under its stupendous weight all his thoughts and sentiments for Hindu deities. The sweeping change came upon his mind abruptly and with a lightning speed. He was taken by surprise and thoroughly upset. Confounded and dismayed, he cried out to his Divine Mother like a helpless child in the clutches of a grave danger: "O Mother, what are you doing to me! Do come and help me out of this catastrophe." But the Mother turned a deaf ear to this piteous appeal. No help came from that quarter. Was she not pulling the wires from behind? How could she let him go before this new play was over? The helpless victim struggled for a time to preserve the old moorings of his mind; then overwhelmed completely by the tremendous pressure of the new ideas and ideals, he lost all his bearings and succumbed to the disastrous change. The Hindu child of the Divine Mother became thoroughly metamorphosed into an orthodox devotee of the Son of Man. His heart was full of Christ and his ideal. Christian

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thought and Christian love appeared for three successive days to be the sole contents of his mind.

On the fourth day, while strolling by the Pañchavaṭī in the afternoon, he caught sight of a strange personage approaching him from a distance. From his features he appeared to be a foreigner. He had a fair skin and beautiful large eyes. His countenance was extraordinarily calm, and his gaze was fixed intently on Ramakrishna. While Ramakrishna was wondering who this visitor might be, the latter drew very near him and a voice came up from the depths of Ramakrishna's heart: "This is the Christ who poured out his heart's blood for the redemption of mankind and suffered agonies for its sake. It is none else but that Master-Yogin Jesus, the embodiment of love." Immediately after that, the Son of Man clamped to his bosom the child of the Divine Mother and became one with him. Christ merged in Ramakrishna, who forthwith lost his outward consciousness and became completely absorbed in the *savikalpa samādhi,* in which he realized his union with Brahman with attributes. After this experience Ramakrishna remained firm in his conviction up to the last day of his life that Jesus Christ was an Incarnation of God.

With this his long and varied course of spiritual disciplines came to a close. Up to the year 1866 he had hurried through numerous kinds of spiritual practice one after another in rapid succession, without getting appreciable interims of rest. The series had ended with his realization of the truth behind Islam.

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It is striking that the only remaining course of religious *sādhanā* of his life, namely, the path of Christ, was taken up by him after an unusual break of nearly eight years. Another striking feature of this spiritual practice appears to be that it was the only *sādhanā* that required him to stir out of the temple compound for picking up the essential directions about the journey.

Buddhism: One may reasonably point out that one of the great religions of the world, viz. Buddhism, is missing in the unparalleled itinerary of Ramakrishna's spiritual travel. A little scrutiny will make it clear, however, that he had really travelled along this road while carrying on his practice of Advaita Vedānta. The latter practically comprehends Buddhism so far as both the method of spiritual discipline and the goal are concerned. The two paths may be equally labelled as the path of knowledge. Both discard the Personal God and all dualistic thoughts and forms of worship with equal emphasis. Both insist on moral perfection, contemplation of the unreality of the objective world and withdrawal of the mind completely from the illusory existence as the cardinal points of spiritual practice. So far they are identical regarding method. Only Advaita Vedānta prescribes meditation on the reality of the human soul and its oneness with the Nirguṇa Brahman as an additional and very important feature of spiritual practice. Nevertheless, a *jñana-yogin* has to cover all that Buddhism prescribes. Of course, by 'Buddhism' is meant here the purest form of this religion as

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preached by Lord Buddha. Then regarding the goal, the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddhist is nothing but merging in the Absolute, and corresponds to the *nirvikalpa samādhi* of the Advaitin.

So Ramakrishna, after having gone through the entire course of Advaita *sādhanā* and spent six months on the transcendental realm of the Absolute, had nothing more to attain through Buddhism. His moral perfection was unimpeachable. *Ahiṁsā* or non-injury came to be almost the breath of his life. While treading on the turf and crushing under his feet the tender blades of grass, he would actually feel an acute physical pain on his chest, as if somebody was trampling upon it. Thus, through his Advaita practice he had mastered both the method and the aim of Buddhism up to a point of perfection. And he held in high esteem Lord Buddha as an Incarnation of God. Regarding Buddhism and its mighty sponsor he himself said, "There is not the least doubt about Lord Buddha's being an Incarnation. There is no difference between his doctrines and those of the Vedic *jñānakāṇḍa*."

JOURNEY'S END

Ramakrishna's tireless and almost breathless journey on the various roads of religion had practically come to an end with his Advaita realization. No doubt, almost immediately after that, he trod the path of Islam, and that of Christianity about eight years later. On both these occasions he attained the goal

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in the course of three days, as if he had been out on holiday excursions. As a matter of fact, after he had mastered, through his Advaita *sādhanā*, the transcendental and impersonal aspects of God, no region of the spiritual plane remained unexplored to him. The alien paths he tried only to see if they led to the same goal of Divinity that he had already realized in all its diverse aspects; and he was satisfied. Hence his Islamic and Christian *sādhanā* differ widely from the rest of his spiritual quest, which had come to a befitting conclusion with his six months' sojourn on the transcendental heights of the Absolute. After that he had practically cried halt and wanted to spend his remaining days in the company of men. From the depths of his heart had gone up the prayer: "O Mother, let me remain in contact with men. Do not make me a dry ascetic." And the prayer had been answered by the imperious command of his Divine Mother: "Stay on the threshold of relative consciousness for the love of humanity."

ON TERRA FIRMA

The indefatigable diver, at long last, came out of the deep seas on to the dry land of human society with his wonderful treasure of all varieties of precious pearls that he had been fishing and stocking himself with all the while. The remaining days of his life he spent in the company of men and enjoyed to his satisfaction the thrilling play of the Divine Mother on the human plane. The universe lay unmasked before

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his illumined eyes. He saw his own self in everybody and everybody's self in himself. At frequent intervals his spirit would skip over the realm of differentiation and remain merged in the Absolute. But immediately after such a spell of the *nirvikalpa samādhi*, he would find above, below, within and all about him one undivided ocean of Divinity, of which the multifarious contents of nature would appear like foams, ripples and billows. With his eyes fixed on this all-pervasive and beatific Oneness and his heart full of the nectar of Divine love, Ramakrishna addressed himself to meet the demands of social life.

It is no wonder that he galvanized all who came in contact with his superhuman personality. By his spotless purity, absolutely unassuming pose and overflowing love for humanity, he attracted all and sundry like a mighty magnet. His genial countenance, artless manners, inspiring talks, enlivened now and then with interesting and illuminating parables and sparkling wit, his jovial mood alternating with the serene composure of divine ecstasy, and above all, his endless sympathy for everybody, did indeed cast a spell on all the good souls that chanced to meet him and stirred up in them an intense craving for spiritual realization. Many a curious and earnest soul learnt from his contact what genuine pearls of spirituality looked like, and by his inspiration and direction dived in his turn to ransack the sea of religion.

An eye-witness who belonged to the Brāhmo Samāj wrote graphically about him: "A living

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evidence of the depth and sweetness of the Hindu Religion is this good and holy man. He has wholly controlled his flesh. It is full of soul, full of the reality of religion, full of joy, full of blessed purity. As a Siddha Hindu ascetic he is the witness of the falsehood and emptiness of the world. His witness appeals to the profoundest heart of every Hindu. He has no other thought, no other occupation, no other friend, no other relation in his humble life than his God. That God is more than sufficient for him. His spotless holiness, his deep and unspeakable blessedness, his unstudied, endless wisdom, his childlike peacefulness and affection towards all men, his consuming and all-absorbing love for God are his only reward." These words from the pen of one who was not strictly a Hindu give us an accurate idea of what people would see in Ramakrishna and of the tremendous spiritual influence exerted by him on those about him who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

It is delightful to picture how a little group of earnest men, sitting before Ramakrishna either in his small room or under the shady trees of the Pañchavaṭī, would listen with rapt attention to the inspired outpourings of his illumined heart. Ramakrishna's appearance, though not imposing, was comely and had a subtle charm about it. He was a man of medium height and brown complexion and he wore a short beard. His large, dark eyes sparkling with lustre would always remain half-closed suggesting the introspective bent of his mind, and his lips would

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often part to release the flash of a bewitching smile. With a simple cloth about his loins and across his chest, he would sit cross-legged and with folded hands before the little group of earnest souls, and keep them spell-bound for hours together by rapturous talks surging up from the depths of his heart. Without the least trace of any air of superiority about him, he would behave like a simple and innocent child and leave on the minds of his select audience the impress of a perfect picture of humility. He would lay no claim to originality, and would ascribe the wisdom of his talks to his Divine Mother, who, as he felt, was the moulder of his thoughts and expressions. He was blissfully ignorant of drawing-room manners, and his speech lacked the tone and polish of the cultured society, as also the rhetorical flash of a finished orator. He would use the homely language, with its characteristic accent, of the simple village folks belonging to the particular district of Bengal from which he came. Moreover, his speech was somewhat halting due to a slight though delightful stammer. "But his words held men enthralled by the wealth of spiritual experience, the inexhaustible store of simile and metaphor, the unequalled powers of observation, the bright and subtle humour, the wonderful catholicity of sympathy and the ceaseless flow of wisdom." Writes one who saw him: "His spirit stood on a pedestal so high that those who approached him could only look up at it in incredulous astonishment. Men marvelled when they heard him, comprehending or mystified. His

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lucidity was as remarkable as his wisdom was unfathomable." And again: "From his lips flowed a stream of marvellous wisdom, unhurried and unresting. No other man within the memory of men spoke as Ramakrishna spoke. The wisdom of the ancient Aryan sages, the difficult teachings of the Upanishads, the intricacies of the Vedānta were all familiar to him as if he had been studying them all his life."

WITH OLD-SCHOOL SCHOLARS AND DEVOTEES

Even as early as the conclusion of his Tāntrika *sādhanā*, he came to know from his Divine Mother that many devotees would come to him in course of time seeking his spiritual guidance. This prescience came to be confirmed by facts. As a matter of fact, as soon as he would come to the end of any particular form of spiritual practice and realize the truth, devotees of the corresponding school would invariably flock to him and go away encouraged and enlightened by his inspiring experience and precious instructions. The ideas of practical religion passed, in this way, from his lips to many a seeker of truth and blessedness, and through each to his own group of disciples and followers. The devotion of different groups of spiritual aspirants belonging to different sects of Hinduism would be quickened into life and made to yield fruits by the vitalizing touch of this wonderful seer of all shades and aspects of spiritual truth. Thus from the quiet retreat of the Dakshineswar temple, Ramakrishna, without beat of drums or flash of

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stump oratory, breathed life into Hinduism with all its kaleidoscopic phases and ushered in an era of Hindu Renaissance.

Numerous were the spiritual aspirants—monks and ascetics of various denominations, householder devotees belonging to different sects, and classical scholars with genuine desire for God-realization—who came to be impressed by Ramakrishna's magnetic personality and benefited by his inspiring contact since the conclusion of his Tāntrika practice. These seekers of truth came, lighted their own torches from Ramakrishna's blazing fire of spirituality, and passed out silently, and in most cases without leaving even a trace of their existence. Of these blessed souls Ramakrishna would, in later days, make passing mention, but it is in connection with quite a handful among them that he gave some interesting details. A cursory glance at a few members of this group may interest us.

Pundit Gauri Kanta Tarkabhushan, who had already been attracted by Ramakrishna, grew sick of worldly life, came to Dakshineswar in 1870 with a burning desire for spiritual progress, sought and obtained his spiritual guidance, and with his permission slipped away quietly from the place in order to plunge into his *sādhanā*. Pundit Narayan Sastri, an orthodox Brāhmin scholar of Rajputana, well-versed in all the six systems of Hindu philosophy, accepted Ramakrishna as his *guru,* obtained from him initiation into *sannyāsa* and stepped silently out of the scene.

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Pundit Padmalochan Tarkalankar, the chief scholar under the Maharaja of Burdwan, came to regard Ramakrishna as a Divine Incarnation and benefit exceedingly by his soul-enthralling company. Krishna Kishore, an ardent devotee of Rāma, who lived within a couple of miles from Dakshineswar, was exalted to a lofty stage of spiritual progress by his close contact with Ramakrishna. Chandra and Girija, two other disciples of the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī and residents of Eastern Bengal, who had developed supernormal powers through Tāntrika *sādhanā,* met Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar and received from him an impetus to proceed straight towards the goal of God-realization.

WITH GURUS

Tota Puri, his spiritual guide, who belonged to the traditional school of Advaita *sādhanā,* was, as we have seen, so struck by his unique achievement and so attracted by his charming personality that he chose to stay at Dakshineswar for eleven months at a stretch. The longer Tota Puri stayed with him, the more deeply was he impressed by his spiritual outlook. In Ramakrishna he found something strikingly original. Slowly and steadily he had to absorb Ramakrishna's ideas about the relative existence till he became a thorough convert.

Like all other *bonafide sannyāsins* of the Advaita school, Tota Puri discarded the entire objective world including even Personal God as a golden dream of childish fancy and would often banter Ramakrishna

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for his unwarranted sallies into the illusory realm of the Divine Mother. The liberated souls of the Advaita school like Tota Puri, not to speak of the neophytes, keep the phenomenal world at arm's length. *Māyā* with her spell of primal ignorance and illusion is the cause of bondage. She hides the reality behind her world of appearance, and thus obstructs the knowledge of it that alone can free the human soul. Surely, the perspective of the ordinary man of the world is an unworthy illusion that one has to get over. He sees in nature nothing but a realm of matter catering to the demands of the senses. Naturally, so long as this illusion lasts, one is shackled to remain on the sense-plane as a bond-slave of the passions, and there is no release for one, according to the Hindu *śāstras,* from the painful cycle of births and deaths. This is why the travellers on the path of knowledge are taught, at the very beginning of their journey, not to make any compromise with this illusory view of nature and to fight it to a finish. This is their sworn enemy, *māyā,* and this they have to overthrow before they may attain the blessed goal of absolute freedom and perfection. Hence, even after coming back from the goal, the liberated souls of this school appear to maintain their original hostile attitude towards *māyā* and treat their vanquished foe with disdain.

But Ramakrishna's outlook was different. Of course, he knew perfectly well, as much as his *guru,* that the universe was merely an appearance, beneath

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which lay the permanent substratum of the reality. Yet instead of slighting this appearance like a traditional *jñānin*, he was all love and devotion towards it, perceiving in it a mysterious and majestic expression of Divinity. In and through everything about him he would feel the eternal presence of absolute Consciousness. What he would realize there, on the heights of the transcendental plane, he would observe here, down below and all about him, under a mysterious garb of names and forms. Before his penetrating vision this garb appeared to be a perfectly transparent sheath, through which he saw like daylight the glory and splendour of the Divine Immanence. And the mighty weaver of this wonderful garb, *māyā*, was no other than his Divine Mother Kālī. She was the primordial Divine Energy, Śakti, and she could not be distinguished from the Supreme Brahman, the Absolute, any more than the power of burning things could be separated from fire. She was both the container and the content of the universe, the kernel as well as the shell. She projected the world and would withdraw it into Herself, just as the spider did with its web. She was the Mother of the universe, the Brahman of the Vedānta and the Ātman of the Upanishads. Ramakrishna realized that She was the eternal lawgiver; She made and unmade laws and it was by Her imperious will that *karma* yielded fruits. She ensnared men with illusion and She again released them from bondage. She was the supreme Mistress of the cosmic show, and all objects, animate and

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inanimate, danced to Her will. Even those who had realized the Absolute in the *nirvikalpa samādhi* had to return to Her at Her will. And so long as there remained the slightest trace of the objective world in one's consciousness, there was no one to challenge Her suzerainty.

Ramakrishna's realization of Divine Immanence made him convinced of the existence of two distinct phases of *māyā*, which he termed *avidyā māyā* and *vidyā māyā*. The former is the grosser aspect of appearance that fixes human souls on the world of senses and whirls them through the round of births and deaths; and it is this aspect of the illusion that the Advaita *sādhakas* are rightly taught to fight. But Ramakrishna realized that after one had put *avidyā māyā* to flight, perceived one's identity with the Supreme Brahman, and come back to the world of appearance, *māyā* would appear altogether in a new rôle. A slight tilting of the angle of vision was sure to convince the liberated souls that they needed no longer to hate or spurn *māyā*. Though the cosmic appearance persisted in their view, it certainly had lost both its original meaning and value. It was no longer a pasture land for the senses, and there was nothing in it to blind their eyes. It was a glorious manifestation of the same Divinity that they had realized in the *nirvikalpa samādhi*. If they cared to observe with a little scrutiny, they were sure to find, after their return from the roof, that the steps of the staircase which they had left behind in their ascent

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were made of the same stuff as the roof. The transcendental appeared to be immanent in the realm of relative existence. It was this aspect of the appearance that Ramakrishna designated as *vidyā māyā*. It was another phase in the play of the Divine Mother, the releasing phase of Her wonderful game, in which She made the liberated souls Her blessed and conscious instruments for releasing other souls from bondage.

Seated securely on the threshold of relative consciousness by the command of his Divine Mother, Ramakrishna had such a view of appearance and reality. His consciousness hovered, as it were, about the borderland of the absolute and the relative existence, the transcendent and immanent aspects of the selfsame Brahman, and gently oscillated across the dividing line. Ecstatic devotion to the Divine Mother and Her play alternated with complete absorption in the serene ocean of absolute Oneness. This made him lay equal emphasis on both the aspects of Brahman.

In the Upanishads one surely finds such a catholic outlook. Obviously, in course of time these two aspects came to be sundered to furnish two distinct ideals for two distinct groups of spiritual aspirants, the *jñānins* and the *bhaktas*, when a reconciliation had to be made through the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Again, after a lapse of centuries, they apparently came to be divided. *Jñāna-yogins* fixed their attention almost exclusively on the transcendental aspect of Brahman as the only truth, looked askance

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at the other aspect as a mere illusion, and rather condescendingly approved of its relative merit by way of a necessary concession to the puerile faith of the *bhaktas*. The *bhaktas*, on the other hand, made capital out of the immanent aspect of God and shut their eyes to the transcendental phase, which, they apprehended, might dry up their hearts by evaporating their love for God, personal and immanent, that they wanted to enjoy through eternity. They wanted to taste sugar and refused to see any sense in becoming one with it. They craved the beatific company of God and not to be lost in Him. Not to speak of the dualists, even the monists among the *bhaktas*, who believed in essential Oneness, chose to qualify their monistic outlook by retaining a shade of dualism up to the above extent. Thus the *jñānins*, or the absolute monists, and the *bhaktas* including the dualists and the qualified monists had parted ways and for centuries the gulf between them had been widening.

This was why, when Ramakrishna would chant the name of God clapping his hands for marking the rhythm, Tota Puri, the *jñāna-yogin*, would feel no scruple in scoffing at him with the sacrilegious remark, "Well, what are you doing? Are you flattening dough for making bread?" And this was why the Bhairavi Brāhmaṇī, the *bhakti-yogin*, on the other hand, could not stand the sight of Ramakrishna's Advaita *sādhanā* under the lead of the dried-up *jñāni* ascetic. But it was given to Ramakrishna, a master of both the schools of spiritual practice, to know fully the strength

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as well as the limitations of them both. He poised himself in the middle and bridged the gulf between them by his epoch-making discovery of the truth behind both the transcendental and immanent aspects of Divinity.

With love, due reverence and extreme humility would Ramakrishna put up with Tota Puri's innocent banter, and point out to him at opportune moments the error involved in his partial and one-sided view of truth. Gradually he succeeded in bending the obdurate mind of the stern ascetic and making him feel that it was the formless ocean of the Absolute that appeared to get congealed by the cold spell of devotion into the Personal God with various names and various forms, and that this Personal God again melted, as it were, into the formless Impersonal under the blazing fire of *jñāna*. Step by step Tota Puri was led to perceive the astounding truth behind the realization of his disciple and to revise his own opinion in its light. Before he left Dakshineswar, he had felt the existence of the Divine Mother and submitted with a devout heart to Her divine majesty.

Ramakrishna's relation with his Tāntrika *guru*, the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, was no less perplexing. Though he was her disciple, his contact proved to be edifying to the Bhairavī. Since his acquaintance with her, he had been looking upon her as his mother, and she practically remained like a member of his household for six years at a stretch. When in 1867 Ramakrishna wanted a change on medical grounds and

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went over to his native village with his nephew, Hriday, the Bhairavī also accompanied him and lived with him in his village home. Ramakrishna spent nearly seven months at this place and enjoyed the delightful association of his younger days. Many people would come to him and become enlightened by his ecstatic talks. His wife, Saradamani, then only a girl of fourteen, also came to stay with him. Ramakrishna permitted her to have a share of his pure and divine love and she was full. She had no lower appetite. She loved him, revered him, served him with all her heart, and wanted nothing in return except her consort's sexless love. And Ramakrishna took upon himself the task of teaching her the lessons of spirituality and also of training her up as an ideal housewife.

Still the contact of his wife and the devotion of his neighbours to him became unbearable to the Bhairavī. She had advanced considerably, no doubt, in her spiritual journey, but she had not yet reached the goal. Her mind was not absolutely free from all shortcomings. When Ramakrishna had placed himself under Tota Puri for spiritual guidance on the path of knowledge, she had suffered terribly from heart-burning. Her motherly love for Ramakrishna proved to be almost a fetish, and she wanted to monopolize his heart. Moreover, she was obsessed with the pride of having such a worthy disciple as Ramakrishna. Indeed her egotism kept her blinded for a while, and

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her behaviour towards all ran counter to her life of spiritual dedication.

Ramakrishna, however, put up with all this like a worthy son, and did not change even by a shade his respectful attitude towards her. He even instructed his girl-wife to treat her as her mother-in-law. By Ramakrishna's patient, loving and illuminating contact, soon the Bhairavī came to realize her folly and left the place abruptly to dive deep into her spiritual *sādhanā*. Before departing she sought Ramakrishna's pardon after having accosted him as an Incarnation of Śrī Gaurāṅga and decked him with sandal paste and garlands. Thus her six years' stay in the blessed company of Ramakrishna gave her a spiritual lift by making her more serious about completing her great journey on the road of religion. He subsequently met her once again, in the course of his pilgrimage, in the holy city of Benares.

WITH RELATIVES

Surely Ramakrishna made a departure from the traditional life of *sannyāsa* by staying in his village home for seven long months and being in close touch with his relatives. *Sannyāsa, ipso facto,* wipes out all distinctions between relations and strangers, snaps all worldly ties and releases one for ever from all sorts of obligations towards one's own flesh and blood. It means an absolutely free life of the spirit, untrammelled even by the memory of one's earlier association with near and dear ones. But Ramakrishna was a

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seer of truth, a *paramahaṁsa;* the consummation of the life of *sannyāsa* was within his palm; he was absolutely a free soul and nothing could possibly tie him.

Yet there is no denying the fact that he overstepped the customary limits of *sannyāsa* and struck an absolutely new path for himself. Even liberated Hindu *sannyāsins* have not been heard to acknowledge over again the family ties which they clipped with their own hands. Who can fancy, for instance, the austere Tota Puri going back to his village home and mixing with his own people? This is altogether unthinkable. Nevertheless, Ramakrishna did this without any hesitation or compunction. Nor was this departure made in the spirit of a reformer. Obviously he did not mean reform, because he never asked his monastic disciples to tread this path. It was peculiarly his own stand, and it was perfectly easy and natural with him. But why did he bring in this innovation even for himself?

One may suggest that Ramakrishna had more humanity than the orthodox *sannyāsins,* and this made him recognize the rights of his relatives over him. He had a very soft and loving heart. As a matter of fact, when he took orders from Tota Puri, he did it on the sly, lest the sight should shock his mother, who was then staying at the Dakshineswar temple. He had so much concern for his mother's sentiments, even when he was going to step into the life of renunciation! Yet his humanity does not appear to go far

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to explain his conduct. Could he not, one may pertinently ask, have a free play of his humanity all over the world without recognizing the special ties of relationship and corresponding obligations to a little group? And even so far as this little family group was concerned, he might cherish humane feelings and deal tenderly with it without playing the particular rôle of son or husband. Who can question, for instance, the humanity of Lord Buddha or Śrī Chaitanya? Their behaviour with relatives, after illumination, was full of love and tenderness, but they did not choose to assume the pose of a householder. Indeed, the reason of humanity is hardly adequate to explain why Ramakrishna went beyond the tether of *sannyāsa*. Perhaps one has to go deeper to unearth the reason.

As we have noticed in the previous pages, Ramakrishna had a radically distinct view of the world, which differed widely from the perspective of even liberated souls like Tota Puri, not to speak of that of people under the spell of *avidyā*, primal ignorance. To him the Absolute and the relative were equally divine. It was this position of his on the threshold of relative consciousness that enabled him to fuse the apparently contradictory schemes of monastic and householder's life into an undivided synthetic attitude. And this wonderful, unique and unprecedented synthesis displayed with equal clearness and perfection the ideals of both the schemes. An illuminating incident may be cited in this connection. After his

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mother's death in 1876, one day he proceeded like a *bona fide* householder to offer oblations with water; but he simply could not do it in spite of his earnest efforts. Joining his palms and bending them, as soon as he filled them with water for offering oblation (*tarpaṇa*), the fingers parted of themselves and his palms were emptied in a trice. Suddenly the idea flashed in his mind that it was not for him, a monk, to offer oblations to his deceased ancestors. This gives us a perfect picture of a householder and a monk rolled into one.

He accepted the world with all its differentiations, because in and through them all he saw, to his infinite delight, the play of the Divine Mother. Were not his relations She Herself enacting Her divine drama? He realized this and wanted to preserve with scrupulous care the interest of the divine play by accommodating and giving free scope to the *dramatis personae* in their distinct rôles. Through his mother, wife, nephews and nieces he saw Kālī appearing in so many garbs, and very naturally he accepted the relations in which they stood to him. And he himself, an ideal monk, put on the mask of a householder, stepped on to the stage like a finished actor and played out his own part. His relatives got from him his genuine love, sincere attention and earnest service, as much as they could possibly expect from him. But certainly, even while playing the householder, he could do nothing that might touch vitally the *sannyāsin* behind the actor's garb. This we have seen in the *tarpaṇa*

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incident; and this we shall have occasion to see in his behaviour towards his wife. Moreover, the facts that he could not even touch a coin, that his nature rebelled against the idea of hoarding money, that he refused to accept an offer of ten thousand rupees from a Marwari devotee for his personal comforts, that a lie could never slip through his lips even by way of a joke, that the contact of shrewd worldly-minded men was exceedingly galling to him, that in every woman —even in that of the street—he invariably saw the Divine Mother, and that he could never touch even with a pair of tongs the grosser objects of sense-enjoyment, prove unmistakably that the heart beneath the householder's mask was pitched permanently on the lofty ideals of monasticism. Thus Ramakrishna's life came to be an unparalleled synthetic structure, an extraordinary composite model of both the divergent schemes of life, namely *gārhasthya* and *sannyāsa*, and each of the components of this unique model represents a perfect ideal of the type it stands for. After the exemplar presented by this marvellous life, both the householders and the monks can mould their respective lives to perfection.

His mother, Chandra Devi, weighed down by bereavements of her first two sons and one daughter-in-law came to Dakshineswar some time before the advent of Tota Puri and spent the remaining days of her life in the holy temple in the presence of her only surviving son. Mathur Babu received her respectfully, lodged her permanently in the music tower and

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catered to her modest requirements. Ramakrishna was all attention to her, and with flawless love and devotion tried to soothe her aching heart. She was happy in his company and got from him all that she could expect from a dutiful son till she breathed her last in 1876.

Ramakrishna had with him for a long time Hriday, a son of one of his cousins. Hriday took care of his maternal uncle, looked after his health and assisted him, and sometimes acted on his behalf in connection with temple duties. Ramakrishna in his turn bathed him with his affection and showed extreme solicitude for his well-being. After the death of his second brother Rameswar, the latter's eldest son, Ramlal, came to stay with him at Dakshineswar. Young Ramlal also received the tender and affectionate care of his uncle. He permitted his nephews to look upon him as their uncle. In spite of his high-soaring soul, there was nothing unnatural in his attitude towards his relatives. He went so far as to cry bitterly on the death of a nephew. Up to this point, the *sannyāsin* in him kept himself perfectly concealed behind the householder's garb.

Ramakrishna's behaviour towards his wife, however, beats all records. It is strange, unprecedented and obviously beyond the range of human understanding. Who has ever seen or even heard of a perfect *sannyāsin* with a complete mastery over the senses in the rôle of a husband? Through this phenomenal synthesis one sees almost the meeting of

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poles! Conjugal love without the slightest tinge of carnality flowed through the immaculate hearts of the supernormal couple. It was, from all angles of vision, an extraordinary union of two spotlessly pure souls—a flesh and blood representation of the conception of Platonic love. There was no room in either of these blessed hearts for the least trace of lust!

There are people, however, who are led by some of the findings of modern Sex Psychology to think that absolute continence is an unnecessary and even injurious aberration of human nature. Suppression of the sexual life has actually been traced to be the cause of certain varieties of psycho-neurotic troubles. But a line should be drawn between suppression and sublimation. Far from wrecking one's health, sublimation of concupiscence surely invigorates one's body and intellect to a considerable extent. Ramakrishna said in later life, "If a man remains absolutely continent for twelve years, he achieves superhuman power." This new branch of modern science may be expected to discover this truth in the course of its experiments with absolutely healthy cases of sublimation of sex energy, and thus clear up the confused idea of this group of people about continence.

There are, moreover, some people who believe in mysticism and yet hold a very poor opinion about continence. They hold that absolute continence is not essential for mystic experience. But there are gradations even in this experience. All mystic experiences do not possess the same import and value, all do not

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belong to the same plane of truth; hence it is quite natural that all of them do not require the same type of mental equipment. It is impossible to reach the highest flights of spiritual illumination unless one is able to establish absolute empire over the senses. Romain Rolland, the great French savant, writes: "All great mystics and the majority of great idealists, the giants among the creators of the spirit, have clearly and instinctively realized what formidable power of concentrated soul, of accumulated creative energy, is generated by a renunciation of the organic and psychic expenditure of sexuality." Ramakrishna used to say in later days, "Absolute continence must be practised if God is to be realized."

However, Ramakrishna's uncommon attitude towards his wife left no room for sex suggestions. Once, while massaging her husband's feet, Sarada Devi wanted to know what he thought about her. Prompt came the amazing reply from his lips: "The Divine Mother who is worshipped in the temple is verily the mother who has given birth to this body and who is now putting up in the music tower, and again it is She who is massaging my feet at the present moment; verily, I look upon you as a representation of the Blissful Mother in human flesh." It takes one's breath away to comprehend how easily Ramakrishna saw the Divine Mother in his wife and yet played out faithfully the rôle of husband by permitting her to massage his feet at dead of night. Perhaps he would not feel his own distinction from the Divine

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Mother even by a hair's breadth; otherwise it would surely have been impossible for him to allow Her, even in the garb of his wife, to touch his feet. Indeed he himself and the whole universe before him was one undivided appearance of the Divine Mother.

On one occasion Ramakrishna made a solemn avowal of the fact that he saw the Divine Mother under the veil of his wife. On the newmoon night of May, 1872, he made her sit before him ceremoniously as a goddess and worshipped her with all the ritualistic details of *shoḍaśī pūjā* prescribed by the Tantras. From the very start, Sarada Devi remained engulfed in superconscious ecstasy; and as soon as the ceremony was over, Ramakrishna too plunged into a beatific trance. The holy couple thus strayed for a while from the sense-world and were perhaps joined in a spiritual union on the transcendental plane of absolute oneness.

Yet Ramakrishna, who regarded Sarada Devi as the Divine Mother and actually worshipped her as such, looked upon her as his wife as well. Sometimes he would say humorously before his disciples, particularly the lay and elderly ones, "Well, can you imagine what earthly purpose has been served by my marriage? Just think for a moment how I would fare if I had no wife to look after this frail body. Who else would take so much care in preparing my meals and seeing particularly that the dishes agreed with my stomach?" However, he was full of tenderness for his wife and deeply concerned to train her up in the ideals of womanhood. With extreme care and

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earnestness he used to instruct her in all matters, secular as well as spiritual, whenever she came to stay with him. And he received from his wife her unbounded and pure love, genuine devotion and earnest service. Thus after his sojourn at Kamarpukur in 1867, the holy couple met at Dakshineswar off and on from March, 1872, and lived together in a unique bond of mutual love and devotion till the end of Ramakrishna's life in 1886.

Sarada Devi, whom the followers of Ramakrishna choose to call the Holy Mother, recorded by the following words what she had experienced in the course of the few nights she had been permitted to spend with Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar:

"I have no words to describe my wonderful exaltation of spirit as I watched him in different states. Under the influence of divine emotion he would sometimes talk on abstruse subjects, sometimes laugh, sometimes weep. Or again, he would become motionless in *samādhi*. This would continue throughout the night. There was such an extraordinary Divine Presence in him that I used to shake with fear and wonder how I could survive the night. Then he discovered that I had to keep awake the whole night lest he should go into *samādhi*, and he asked me to shift my bed to the music tower."

It is a fact, however strange it may appear, that Sarada Devi also came to regard Ramakrishna as the Divine Mother, and she maintained this attitude towards her husband up to the end of her life. It may

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be mentioned in this connection how on Ramakrishna's passing away she cried like a bereaved child, "Mother! O Mother! Where are you gone leaving me?" Yet the wife's rôle was there intact all the while. Considering that she had been widowed at her husband's demise, she proceeded to put on the widow's garb, which however she could not do as she came to feel the continued presence of Ramakrishna with her.

And this surely makes confusion worse confounded! Who can imagine what a homogeneous synthesis of the Divine Mother, a beloved wife and a favourite disciple comes to? And again, can anybody conceive what a perfect blending of the Divine Mother, a dear husband and a spiritual guide looks like? These are obviously beyond the tether of human comprehension, and language fails hopelessly to characterize them. They may be held to be supernormal, superhuman, supernatural, nay, even divine, according to the mental bias of the assessor, but nothing possibly can be expected to lead sex-ridden mortals to comprehend the synthetic concept that went to colour the outlook of this holy couple. One thing, however, is clear. These unique syntheses have emphasized the ideal of asexual life for both the householders and the *sannyāsins*. The householder's ideal of self-control has been pitched up to the standard of divine purity! The *sannyāsin's* ideal of conquest of flesh has risen triumphantly above the ordeals of temptation to the heights of absolute sexlessness! And this has been done by both the members of the holy couple, so that

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individuals belonging to both the sexes may get necessary light and inspiration for gaining mastery over the senses.

WITH SUFFERING HUMANITY

Ramakrishna's relatives obtained, as noticed above, their due share of his sincere and selfless love, and they had nothing more to desire. Yet his heart was not sealed only for his relatives. Rather it practically encompassed the whole world like the broad sky, and made no distinction between strangers and relatives, the rich and the poor. His fountain of love was inexhaustible, and it was open to all who were thirsty and wanted to drink out of it. He saw the Divine Mother in every creature that breathed, and his love and regard for both were equally intense. His heart would break at the sight of misery. In fact, he would identify himself with suffering humanity and seek redress with the passionate appeal of a sufferer. So long as he felt the necessity of feeding himself, he had to see to the feeding of the Divine Mother in the temple and also of all hungry souls that met his eyes.

On one occasion, some time in 1868, when he had been out on a pilgrimage with Mathur Babu visiting many holy places including Benares, Allahabad and Brindaban, and verifying the sanctity of those places by his wonderful visions of the respective principal deity or deities of each, he made a halt at Deoghar or Baidyanath Dham. This town with its neighbourhood was at that time in the grip of a terrible

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famine. The Santhal inhabitants of the place were going without food for days; their bodies were reduced to skeletons; they had hardly any stuff to cover themselves with; and they were dying of starvation. The sight was more than what Ramakrishna could bear. He took his seat by the side of the unfortunate victims of famine, wept bitterly with them like one of their fellow-sufferers and was determined to fast with them unto death, unless something was done to redress their sufferings. Mathur Babu had to spend a lot of money for feeding and clothing the famine-stricken people before he could get out of that impasse.

Another instance is to the point. Some time in 1870, Mathur Babu, while going out to visit one of his estates for the collection of rent, took Ramakrishna with him. From the worldly point of view, this turned out to be a folly, for which Mathur Babu had to pay heavily. His tenants, at that time, were passing through a crisis. For two consecutive years the harvests had failed, and this had brought the people of the locality to the verge of starvation. Ramakrishna's tender heart was shocked by the sight of appalling poverty around him, and he immediately asked Mathur Babu to feed the tenants and help them financially instead of demanding his dues from them. He convinced Mathur Babu of the fact that the Divine Mother was really the owner of the property, that he was only Her steward, and as such he ought to spend Mother's money for allaying the miseries of Her tenants. Mathur Babu had to act up to Ramakrishna's

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advice, and thus undoubtedly he set an example of the correct attitude of a landlord towards his tenants.

Sometimes the physical pain of any unfortunate person before his eyes would actually be communicated to his extremely sympathetic heart and equally sensitive body. Once, at the sight of a boatman being slapped by another person, he did actually cry aloud, "Help! I am hurt! I am hurt!" and people really noticed on his back fresh wales recording mysteriously the finger-prints of the assailant, an exact replica of those on the body of the assailed boatman. Who knows to what extent a clear and constant vision of the majestic Oneness may affect the phenomenal existence? Indeed this mysterious occurrence reminds one of the wisdom of the utterance, "There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

At the sight of bereaved persons his heart would melt as if he himself was the sufferer. His actual participation in the sorrows of the distressed soul would relieve it of half the burden. And then the soothing unction of his consoling and inspiring words would follow till the wound in the aggrieved heart would be thoroughly healed.

His realization of Divinity in the phenomenal world had thrown open to him a new vista, in which he saw his Divine Mother, his relatives and in fact all people including suffering humanity on the same plane and in the same phase of reality. Towards all these varied appearances of *vidyā-māyā* he maintained the

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same attitude of unbounded love and devotion. And in this he differed widely from the traditional *jñānins*, who have very little sympathy for the world of illusion, which they are out to erase altogether from their consciousness. How could they support illusion by stirring out to redress the sufferings of unreal creatures stalking like unsubstantial shadows in the dreamland of *māyā*? Sympathy for a sufferer would surely amount to an affirmation of reality of the illusory appearance, and this would surely impede one's progress on the road of Advaita *sādhanā*, which teaches one to master the fact that "Supreme Brahman alone is real and everything else is unreal." The neophytes of this school, therefore, have perforce to shut their eyes to suffering humanity, and the liberated souls often laugh away its existence, just as they will sneer at the idea of the Personal God as a golden dream of childish fancy. We know how Ramakrishna opened the eyes of Tota Puri, a liberated soul of this school, by his illuminating lesson on the Divine Mother. Exactly in a similar way, he widened, in later days, the outlook of his young and brilliant disciple, Narendranath, by imparting his unique lesson on suffering humanity. He made it clear to his disciple that the *jīva* was no other than Śiva, that every creature was God Himself in a particular garb of name and form. Thus by the grace of his master Narendranath, or Swami Vivekananda, in which name he appeared before the world in later life, came to grasp this grand truth bearing on the relative aspect of Divinity.

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His attitude towards suffering humanity, moreover, surpassed the ideal outlook of the *bhaktas*. These including the dualists as well as the qualified monists accept the world with all its contents either as the creation or as the projection of God. Naturally they are pained to see misery in such a world. But the highest expression of their heart consists in showering mercy upon the sufferers. Śrī Chaitanya, the great Prophet of Bhakti-yoga, preached the attitude of kindness towards all creatures as one of the cardinal requirements in the make-up of a genuine devotee's heart. Ramakrishna, however, could not content himself merely with this attitude. Addressing Narendranath and some other disciples, he said one day, "They talk of mercy to the creatures! How audacious it is to think of showering mercy on the *jīva*, who is none other than Śiva. One has to regard the creature as God Himself and proceed to serve it with a devout heart, instead of taking up the pose of doling out mercy." Surely the idea of mercy can never fit in with Ramakrishna's vision of a deified universe. It is nothing short of a sacrilege to take a higher stand than the sufferer and stretch out a helping hand in a mood of condescension. One has to give up the conceit of one's relative position and bend on one's knees before God in the guise of the unfortunate victim of misery, and serve Him literally with one's heart's blood, if that be necessary.

This, indeed, is a revelation! An altogether new method of worship of God is placed before the spiritual

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aspirant to purify his soul with and to lead him right up to the realization of Divine Immanence, from which the transcendental realm of the Absolute is only a step ahead. The unique and pregnant utterance of Ramakrishna pitched up by one swing the notes of both the *jñāna* and *bhakti* strings beyond their traditional range of intensity. This is why Narendranath, on that very day, said to one of his brother disciples, "I have heard today a saying of unparalleled significance. Time permitting, I shall communicate to the world the profound import of this marvellous utterance." And Vivekananda did live to redeem his promise by introducing in the world the novel method of divine worship through service of suffering humanity as a veritable manifestation of God, and by inaugurating the Ramakrishna Mission to demonstrate the spiritual value of this method by practical experiments along the line.

This idea of service as worship differs essentially from the concepts of Christian charity and Buddhist humanitarianism. From the objective standpoint, no doubt, it resembles both of these. All three equally consist of acts of service for the redress of human sufferings. So far, of course, there is nothing to distinguish among them. And this is why there are people who are apt to confuse Ramakrishna's worship of God through service of suffering man with the acts of kindness prescribed by Buddhism and Christianity. These latter constitute only a phase of the right conduct of a spiritual aspirant, merely a part of an auxiliary course of moral training. Buddhism does not believe

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in worshipping God in any form, and Christianity lays down: "Love thy neighbour as thyself." By 'self,' of course, Christianity never means God, because it does not subscribe to the Advaitist's belief in the identity of self and Supreme Brahman. The Christian injunction, therefore, simply emphasizes the intensity of love which one has to develop for fellow-beings by trying to look upon others' miseries as one's own. Any way, humanitarian service, according to either of these two religions, is only a part of a complete programme of spiritual practice and is endowed only with a moral value. But Ramakrishna presents altogether a different thing. He introduced through his disciple, Vivekananda, a new code and formula of divine worship. Service of suffering humanity with the subjective outlook and attitude of worshipping Divinity is by itself an entire programme of a new form of spiritual practice that can independently lead, as has been observed, an aspirant up to the goal of God-realization. Surely this is an innovation and a precious acquisition in the world's storehouse of religious *sādhanās*.

Ramakrishna's realization of the divinity of man was at the basis of this message. He was firm in his conviction that one could certainly realize God by serving Him through man as through an image. On one occasion he actually prescribed this as an independent form of spiritual practice to one of his devotees and within a short time heard of the wonderful consummation of this unique *sādhanā*. The devotee was a lady, the daughter of a pious Brāhmo gentleman,

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Manilal Mullick, who held Ramakrishna in high esteem. The lady used to be distracted during the hours of meditation by stray thoughts. When she told Ramakrishna about her difficulty, the latter, to her great surprise, wanted to know who happened to be her pet. She told him that it was her brother's child whom she loved most. Ramakrishna advised her to love the boy as intensely as she could, and added that she was to look upon him not merely as her nephew, but as Gopāla, or child Kṛishṇa. She acted up to this unique spiritual advice with all her earnestness and devotion, and before long her mind soared up to an exalted state of spiritual ecstasy, when she saw her nephew transformed before her eyes into the radiant form of child Krishṇa. A change of her subjective outlook towards her nephew led her to be blessed with a number of beatific visions.

This incident is significant. It shows how a tilting of the angle of vision endowed the natural love of the lady for her relative with the potency of spiritual practice and rushed her up to the heights of realization. One may take it that by a similar process the philanthropist's love for suffering humanity can also undergo a similar transformation into a potent religious *sādhanā*. Seeing God in the object of love and maintaining an attitude of worship towards it through service impart a spiritual value to the ordinary love of the relative or that of the altruist. Absolutely selfless love based on purely human considerations is very hard to grow. And precisely for this reason the common love of a

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relative and even that of a philanthropist, with their almost invariable tinge of selfishness, have to be distinguished from the worship of God through the service of humanity. The two are poles apart in value and significance.

Ramakrishna also made this distinction between the two types of humanitarian service, the moral and the spiritual one. One of his rich acquaintances, Sambhu Charan Mullick, informed him one day of his intention of spending a considerable amount of money on a number of charitable acts. Instead of encouraging his pious wish, Ramakrishna, to his surprise, said to him rather bluntly, "These acts are noble indeed, if one can perform them without desire for any kind of return. But it is difficult. However, don't forget for a moment that these acts constitute the means, and not the end of human perfection. The object of human life is to develop supreme love for God and to realize Him. Just imagine, if God is to appear before you at this moment, what will you pray for? Will you ask for a number of hospitals and dispensaries, or for His constant grace and vision? Remember that God is real and everything else is unreal. Dive deep into spiritual practice and try to realize Him before you come to the end of your life. It does not behove a person like yourself to forget God and get entangled in a number of charitable acts." This remark cannot be misconstrued to prove Ramakrishna's apathy for humanitarian work. Surely he who felt so keenly for the famine-stricken people felt equally for the diseased

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going without treatment. He could not obviously undervalue the need of a hospital or a dispensary. His piteous appeal to Mathur Babu for serving the famished people of Deoghar and for relieving the distress of his own tenants, as well as his request to another gentleman for removing the scarcity of drinking water in a particular village, shows how acutely he felt for suffering humanity. Evidently his advice to Sambhu Babu was purely of a personal nature and aimed at working up the latter's lukewarm zeal for spiritual progress. Sambhu Babu's enthusiasm for charity appeared to be much more intense than that for realizing God; and, without doubt, he had nothing more than the ordinary idea about charity. Hence very pertinently did Ramakrishna ask him not to think too highly of this kind of social service and to turn his eyes towards the supreme object of realizing God. Perhaps in Sambhu Babu Ramakrishna observed the potentialities of spiritual growth and proceeded to give him the necessary lift from the moral plane to the spiritual by turning his attention from philanthropy to religious *sādhanā*. This incident proves conclusively how Ramakrishna distinguished between the type of humanitarian service contemplated by Sambhu Babu and the worship of Divinity through man that he prescribed to Manilal Mullick's daughter for realizing God. His message of divine worship through the service of suffering humanity, of serving the *jīva* as Śiva, therefore, leaves no chance for confusing it with the popular view of humanitarian work.

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WITH MODERN INTELLECTUALS

Ramakrishna would be shocked at the sight of spiritual starvation no less than that of a scourge of nature. He would be pained exceedingly to find how many among the modern intellectuals in their vanity would look down upon the idea of God and religion as a sham and a mockery. Whenever he met any of these enlightened atheists and agnostics, he spared no pains to correct by his humble, yet piercing, remarks their flippant attitude towards things spiritual. Moreover, he was always deeply interested if he learnt that any individual of the educated section was really serious about religious life. He would go out to meet such a person and see how far he had advanced on the spiritual path. In this way he came to be acquainted with a number of people who, in spite of their education on modern lines, had evinced a considerable amount of sincere enthusiasm for practical religion. Among these there were even one or two who had made a remarkable progress in spiritual life. He would be happy in the company of these people and would take delight in serving them with all humility by his inspired talks in order to broaden their religious outlook and spur them on towards the goal of God-realization.

It may be mentioned in this connection that among the noteworthy intellectuals of his day, Ramakrishna met Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the great Bengali poet, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the father of the Bengali novel, Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the reputed nineteenth century savant of Bengal, and Maharshi

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Devendranath Tagore, the distinguished leader of the Ādi Brāhmo Samāj and father of the famous poet, Rabindranath Tagore. But the most interesting and significant contact he made with the enlightened section was through his voluntary meeting in 1875 with Srijut Keshab Chunder Sen, the celebrated Brāhmo leader, in a villa not very far from the Kālī temple. This was followed by a growing intimacy between the highly cultured and renowned dignitary of the Brāhmo Samāj and the humble and barely literate saint of Dakshineswar. Ramakrishna would sometimes call on Keshab either in his church or at his house, and Keshab would on occasions come to meet him at Dakshineswar.

Nagendranath Gupta, an eye-witness, presents his interesting reminiscence by portraying vividly, in his usual way, one of the thrilling meetings of these two remarkable personages. "By Keshab's express desire," he writes, "I accompanied him on one occasion when he went to see the Paramahamsa, at Dakshineswar. The meeting did not take place in the precincts of the temple. Keshab with a small party including myself went by river on a small steam yacht belonging to Maharaja Nripendranarayan Bhup of Cooch Behar, Keshab's son-in-law. At Dakshineswar Ramakrishna Paramahamsa accompanied by his nephew, Hriday, boarded the launch, which resumed its way upstream. Ramakrishna and Keshab sat on deck on the bare board, cross-legged and facing each other. They sat close to each other, and as Rama-

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krishna grew animated and earnest, he drew closer to Keshab until his knees and thighs rested on Keshab's lap. I sat next to them, almost touching Keshab. The Paramahamsa stayed in the boat for about eight hours, and except for the few minutes during which he remained in Samādhi he never ceased speaking, and from that day to this I have never heard another man speak as he spoke. There was no conversation at all. During all those eight hours Keshab, the brilliant orator and accomplished scholar, scarcely spoke a dozen sentences. All that he did was to put a question at long intervals or to ask for an explanation. The only speaker was Ramakrishna and his words flowed in a steady stream even as the Gaṅgā rippled and flowed underneath us. We heard nothing but that gentle, earnest voice, we saw nothing but the ascetic, lean figure before us, with the half-closed eyes and the hands folded on the lap. The moving lips uttered the simplest words, but what could soar higher or plumb deeper than the thoughts! Every thought was a revelation, every parable, every imagery, every simile was a marvel. He spoke of the human face and its various indications of character, he spoke of his own experiences of many forms of devotion, he described the perennial ecstasy of the communion of the spirit, and when he spoke of the formless (Nirākāra) Brahman he passed into Samādhi, a trance in which his face radiated beatific ecstasy."

Keshab was struck by the broad and catholic outlook of Ramakrishna towards all religions, by his

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original and illuminating utterances and above all by his radiant life of spirituality. Keshab with many Brāhmo devotees like Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, Vijoy Krishna Goswami, Pundit Shivnath Sastri and Trailokyanath Sanyal would sit enthralled for hours listening to the rapturous utterances of Ramakrishna regarding his wonderfully liberal view about the different religions. Indeed, he did not merely tolerate the various faiths, but actually accepted all of them as so many paths leading to the realization of God. God, who was obviously one and the same, was worshipped, as he perceived, by all the devotees of the earth under different names and distinct forms. Firm in his conviction, he would say emphatically and unequivocally, "I have practised all religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects.....I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths.....Wherever I look, I see men quarrelling in the name of religion—the Hindus, Mohammedans, Brāhmos, Vaishṇavas and the rest, but they never reflect that He who is called Kṛishṇa is also called Śiva, and bears the name of Primitive Energy (Śakti), Jesus and Allah as well—the same Rāma with a thousand names. The tank has several ghāts. At one Hindus draw water in pitchers, and call it 'Jala'; at another Mussalmans draw water in leathern bottles and call it 'Pānī'; at a third Christians do the same and call it 'water.' Can we imagine that the water is not 'Jala,' but only

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'Pānī' or water? How ridiculous! The substance is one under different names and everyone is seeking the same substance; nothing but climate, temperament and names vary. Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely realize Him."

One can very well imagine how such simple, clear, vigorous and impressive utterances of Ramakrishna about his conception of Universal Religion would work on the devout and rational minds of the Brāhmo devotees before him. Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, the accomplished Brāhmo preacher and right-hand man of Keshab, has left a faithful record of his own impression about Ramakrishna's influence over this group of modern intellectuals. Lord Ronaldshay, the ex-Governor of Bengal, gives us an accurate idea of this impression by quoting at length in his famous book, *The Heart of Āryāvarta*, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar's own words from a monograph entitled *Paramahamsa Ramakrishna*, republished from the *Theistic Quarterly Review*. An extract from *The Heart of Āryāvarta* is given below:

"'What is there in common between him (Ramakrishna) and me?' he (Pratap) asked. 'I, a Europeanized, civilized, self-centred, semi-sceptical, so-called educated reasoner, and he, a poor, illiterate, unpolished, half-idolatrous, friendless Hindu devotee? Why should I sit long hours to attend to him, I, who have listened to Disraeli and Fawcett, Stanley and Max Müller, and a whole host of European scholars

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and divines?.....and it is not I only, but dozens like me who do the same.' And after due deliberation he comes to the conclusion that it is his religion that is his only recommendation. But his religion itself is a puzzle. 'He worships Śiva, he worships Kālī, he worships Rāma, he worships Kṛishṇa, and is a confirmed advocate of Vedāntic doctrines.....He is an idolater, yet is a faithful and most devoted meditator on the perfections of the One Formless, Absolute, Infinite Deity.....His religion is ecstasy, his worship means transcendental insight, his whole nature burns day and night with a permanent fire and fever of a strange faith and feeling.'"

Pratap's appreciation of Ramakrishna and his attitude towards the latter have been expressed more pointedly in the following statement: "So long as he (Ramakrishna) is spared to us, gladly shall we sit at his feet to learn from him the sublime precepts of purity, unworldliness, spirituality and inebriation in the love of God." Another statement made by the same gentleman goes to show how Ramakrishna's ideas were absorbed by the group of Brāhmo devotees who had the occasion of coming in contact with him: "He (Ramakrishna) by his childlike Bhakti, by his strong conceptions of an ever-ready Motherhood, helped to unfold it (God as our Mother) in our minds wonderfully.....By associating with him we learnt to realize better the Divine attributes as scattered over the three hundred and thirty millions of deities of mythological India, the gods of the Purāṇas."

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Such statements about Ramakrishna published in the Brāhmo Samāj papers and journals show clearly what a tremendous influence was exerted by the God-intoxicated saint of Dakshineswar over a group of modern intellectuals—how a Hindu of Hindus believing intensely in every aspect and phase of Hinduism including even image-worship stamped the impress of his realized truths on the rational and analytical minds of these individuals. Besides, such publication served another and a very important purpose. It went to introduce Ramakrishna to the educated middle class of Calcutta, from which section came most of his disciples.

WITH DISCIPLES

The Divine Mother had already intimated to Ramakrishna that a group of pure and earnest souls were to come to him in order to receive his message and live up to it. Under his spiritual guidance they were to attain Blessedness and some of them to carry his message to humanity as well. Many anxious days had been passed before he met them. Even before he saw any one of these persons, his love for them had become so intense that he could not bear the delay of their visit and would often cry aloud from the house-top, "Come, my children, where are you? My life has become unbearable by your delay in meeting me."

It was a mention of Ramakrishna in one of the Brāhmo Samāj journals that set this group moving towards him in 1879, and this process went on till 1884.

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Of these persons who came to light their torches from the blazing fire of Ramakrishna's spirituality, some, specially the elderly ones, remained householders up to the end of their lives, while most of the younger ones embraced the life of *sannyāsa*. By Ramakrishna's wonderful guidance and inspiration both his lay and monastic disciples applied themselves seriously to build up their spiritual life. Ramachandra Dutta, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Mahendranath Gupta, Balaram Bose, Durgacharan Nag, Purna Chandra Ghosh, Kalipada Ghosh, Devendranath Mazumdar and many others including a number of lady-devotees belonged to the householders' group, and everyone of these blessed souls has left a brilliant record of spiritual achievement.

To this group of elders Ramakrishna's advice was quite different from what he placed before his younger disciples. He asked them not to renounce the world and taught them how like *karma-yogins* they were to practise detachment in the midst of worldly concerns and keep their minds fixed on God. They were to give up the idea of proprietorship and believe that all their earthly possessions as well as their near and dear ones really belonged to God. And as humble servants of God they were to take up seriously the worldly duties as so many sacred tasks imposed upon them by their Divine Master. Thus the ideal of selfless work combined with devotion to God, the age-old message of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, would be indelibly impressed on the minds of his lay disciples by Ramakrishna's blazing

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words: "When you are at work, use only one of your hands and let the other touch the feet of the Lord. When your work is suspended, take his feet in both your hands and put them in your heart!" At times he would encourage them to keep to their walk of life by saying, "What will you gain if you renounce the world? Family-life is a fortress for you. Moreover, he who has attained knowledge is always free. It is only the lunatic who says, 'I am enchained,' that ends by being so. The mind is all in all. If it is free, you are free. Whether in the forest or in the world, I am never enchained. I am the child of God, the King of kings. Who then dares to put me in chains?"

He noticed that each individual had a distinct line of spiritual growth and guided each along his or her own path. Hence there was a wide range of spiritual practices prescribed by him for different individuals. Sometimes his course of training for a particular disciple would appear to be astounding; nevertheless it would prove no less effective than normal courses prescribed for other people. For instance, he never asked Girish Chandra Ghosh, the great Bengali dramatist and actor, to give up his drinking habit or his profession of appearing on the stage with public women, and even exempted him from praying and meditating. All that Girish was asked to do was to rely absolutely on the Lord and abandon all initiative. This wonderful recipe really went to heal him completely; and in spite of his earlier record of a Bohemian life, he came to rank as one of the most devout of

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Ramakrishna's lay disciples. Ramakrishna had the power to see through the minds of the devotees, direct them individually on their distinct lines of advance, and impart to them by a mere wish, glance or touch, spiritual fervour and ecstasy.

On one occasion the lay disciples witnessed a phenomenal descent of divine grace upon them at the galvanizing touch of their Master. It was the first of January, 1886, and it has since been observed by some of them as the red-letter day of their spiritual life. About thirty of them met Ramakrishna in the garden-house at Cossipore, a northern suburb of Calcutta, where he had been removed for treatment during the last days of his life. Ramakrishna in a mood of divine ecstasy blessed and touched each of these persons individually, and instantly their minds were overwhelmed by a sudden rush of spiritual thoughts and emotions. Some leaped with joy, some began to cry bitterly for God, and others sat absorbed in deep meditation. A new realm resplendent with spiritual light and beatitude stood revealed before their eyes, and everyone for the time being, utterly oblivious of the world about him, became thrilled with the vigorous pulsations of a new life and the intense joy and wonder of mystic experience.

The younger disciples, however, though present in the house, could not come to him before the benignant mood was over. This served to emphasize the fact that they were required to tread a different path. Ramakrishna was harnessing these young souls for

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a gigantic task that lay ahead. Their search for spiritual truth was not to end merely in attaining their own blessedness and salvation, but also in transforming themselves into stupendous levers for the spiritual uplift of thousands of human souls. This was why, when Narendranath (later Swami Vivekananda), the indomitable leader of this group of disciples, wanted to remain absorbed in the beatitude of *nirvikalpa samādhi,* Ramakrishna was quick to reprove him with the remark, "Shame on you! I thought you were to be the great banian tree giving shelter to thousands of weary souls. Instead you are selfishly seeking your own well-being. Let these little things alone, my child." With this group of disciples Ramakrishna was building up, slowly and silently, a new order of monks to whom he was to bequeath the legacy of his spiritual attainment. They were to receive his message, verify and assimilate it by their own realization, and then pass it on to other yearning souls. They were to be the worthy medium through which Ramakrishna's spirit was to be communicated to the world.

Hence their lives had to be built on strong and secure foundations which might enable them to shoulder the grave responsibilities that lay in store for them. It was not for them to go in for cheap and washy sentiments or to shamble somehow into the region of spiritual ecstasy. Their minds were to be melted in the fire of austere spiritual discipline and purged of all impurities, so that they might receive and retain a clear and lasting impress of Rama-

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krishna's spiritual mould. Ramakrishna by his potent touch, glance or will, no doubt, imparted to them, on suitable occasions, a foretaste of beatific bliss, but that was meant simply for spurring them on towards the goal. These heroic souls were required by their 'Great Taskmaster' to trudge up the precipitous road of religion and explore the summit for themselves, so that after their descent from the dizzy heights they might serve as efficient guides. It was necessary that they should know every inch of the road along which they were destined to lead thousands of weary and earnest pilgrims.

This was precisely the reason why Ramakrishna was particular about testing the physical as well as the moral stamina of every person before admitting him into this select group. A fresh young mind, not yet tainted by worldly thoughts, and plastic enough to be cast in his spiritual mould, was what he valued most as entitling one to be a member of this holy band. Hence this batch came to be composed mostly of young ardent souls, some being even in their teens. And with one exception all of them came from the educated middle class of Bengal.

Latu (Swami Adbhutananda), a Bihari by birth and the young servant of a Bengali devotee, was the exceptional member, who was blissfully ignorant of the three R's. Gopal (Swami Advaitananda) was rather advanced in years and Tarak (Swami Sivananda) was older than the rest. Hari (Swami Turiyananda) was scarcely fourteen; Subodh (Swami Subodhananda),

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Gangadhar (Swami Akhandananda) and Kali (Swami Abhedananda) were very nearly of the same age. Sarada (Swami Trigunatitananda) was quite a boy when he met Ramakrishna for the first time in 1885. Hariprasanna (Swami Vijnanananda), destined to be a monk of this holy Order in later life, came to Ramakrishna with the cousins Sarat (Swami Saradananda) and Sasi (Swami Ramakrishnananda) when all of them were going through college education. Narendra (Swami Vivekananda), Rakhal (Swami Brahmananda), Baburam (Swami Premananda), Jogin (Swami Yogananda) and Niranjan (Swami Niranjanananda) were almost of the same age and were perhaps just crossing their teens when they came to the Master.

Ramakrishna, the child of the Divine Mother, was really very happy with them all and showered upon them the intense love and tender sentiments of an affectionate mother. And in his presence the young visionaries found a world of joy, which would make them forget all other concerns of life. This pulled them irresistibly from their normal orbits and made them gravitate towards the great and mysterious centre of attraction. A bewitching smile of the Master and a few endearing words were all that these young captives panted for. The atmosphere of their homes grew distasteful to them, and they felt absolutely no hesitation in playing truant in the school or leaving their homes furtively to have a look at their idol of love and spend a few hours in his thrilling company. At the sight of him Rakhal would jump

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with joy and rush to his arms like a pet child. Ramakrishna treated him as his own son, while Naren was almost the cynosure of his eyes. Baburam's angelic purity would be rewarded by the rare privilege of his holding the Master's body during the periods of *samādhi*. The good-natured Jogin would be encouraged by him, now and then, to be a little more bold, assertive and practical, while the impetuous Niranjan would be coaxed to put a brake on his aggressive zeal. In this way every member of this holy family came to feel very keenly and distinctly the personal touch of Ramakrishna and regard him as his nearest and dearest one.

His way of training these young souls was unique. He did not rule them like the traditional *gurus* with the rod of iron, nor did he believe in thrusting doctrines or dogmas into their young minds. The idea of a nagging preceptor was foreign to him. He was all love and compassion for these young pupils and chose to meet them almost on an equal footing. *Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re,* he led each one of them by the hand along the path best suited to his taste, temperament and capacity. His business was not to saw, chisel and model the young minds after a fixed pattern, nor to build up therein a number of edifices with materials culled from his own storehouse of spiritual ideas and ideals. He believed that his function resembled that of the gardener, and not that of the carpenter or the mason. By this attitude towards his spiritual pupils, surely he anticipated the

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psychological outlook recommended by modern pedagogy. However, like an experienced and adroit gardener he went about tending these young minds and helping each to grow from within towards the perfection of the type it represented. His affectionate and vigilant eyes were upon them all, and his deft and cautious hand was always busy in removing the obstacles that might possibly retard their growth. Besides, his radiant spirit would touch, silently and almost imperceptibly, the different budding minds before him and vitalize each to unfold its petals and blossom forth with all the splendour and grace of a distinct form and fragrance.

The young aspirants lived securely in an atmosphere of unbounded joy and freedom, which were made the first condition of their growth by their peerless spiritual guide. The melancholy air of the stoic was not to touch their tender minds. He would rather strive to keep up the lustre and buoyancy of these young souls by humouring them occasionally with endearing words, interesting parables and witty remarks, and sometimes by making them roar with laughter by his marvellous mimicry of worldly men and women in a variety of funny poses. Even the consciousness of sin, which sits heavily on the hearts of devotees of particular schools, was not permitted to cast a gloom on their bright countenance. Ramakrishna told them with emphatic perspicuity: "The miserable man who repeats tirelessly 'I am a sinner' really becomes a sinner." With a beatific smile on

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his lips and a sparkling humour in his words he would brace up the young brigade for the great expedition. He would make them feel that the goal was not very far and the march was no more than a delightful excursion. His inspiring words would convince them that they could burst the bonds of *māyā* the moment they would turn their will that way. "Make your will work," he would say, "and you will be free. The idiot who repeats without stopping 'I am a slave' ends by really becoming a slave.....But that man is free who says, 'I am free from the bondage of the world. I am free; is not the Lord our Father?'" "Bondage is of the mind, but freedom also is of the mind."

Instead of burdening their minds with dogmas or fettering their feet with a fixed code of rituals, he urged them simply to verify the truths mentioned in the *śāstras* by their own experiment and observation. He pointed out to each a particular path and asked him to proceed with the balanced attitude of an empiricist and discover for himself the sublime spiritual truths that lay at the end of the path. Though he was absolutely firm in his conviction about these truths, he chose to infuse into them a healthy spirit of rational investigation. His method perfectly suited the trend of the modern mind and very naturally appealed to the rational understanding of his young disciples. Moreover, instead of allowing them to indulge in vain controversies about metaphysical and theological themes, he would stir up in their hearts, by his very

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presence as well as by his pointed and emphatic words, an intense yearning for realizing God. "I do not like argument," he would say, "God is above the powers of reason; I see that all that exists is God; then of what avail to reason? Go into the garden, eat the mangoes, and come out again! You do not go in to count the leaves on the mango trees. So why waste time in dispute about reincarnation or idolatry?"

And, for realizing God, he told them clearly that no half-hearted measure would be of any avail. They must withdraw their minds entirely from the sense-world and turn them inward before they could expect to stand face to face with Truth Eternal. They were not to make any compromise with craving for wealth or sensual life. Lust and greed for wealth had to be banned if they wanted seriously to realize spiritual truth. Thus would he work up their zeal for embracing a life of renunciation, selflessness and purity. One day he actually made them beg their food like *sannyāsins* and on another occasion distributed among them ochre cloth, the robe that distinguishes the Hindu monk from the householder. Thus did Ramakrishna breathe the spirit of *sannyāsa* into the supple yet vigorous minds of his picked group of young disciples, initiate them, in his simple and unceremonious way, into monastic life, and lay firmly and securely the foundation on which the Ramakrishna Order of monks was to be built up in the fulness of time.

It was during the last protracted illness of Rama-

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krishna that his young disciples really banded themselves together under the leadership of Narendranath into a holy brotherhood. Ramakrishna's fatal throat trouble began in the middle of 1885 and lasted for about a year; and of this period, he had to spend nearly four months in a Calcutta house and about eight months in a suburban villa at Cossipore. His lay devotees met the entire expenses of his treatment, while his young disciples, strengthened immensely by the presence and vigilant service of the Holy Mother (Sarada Devi), shouldered the responsibility of nursing him. Twelve of them stayed away from their homes to attend the sick-bed constantly, while the remaining three would join them frequently to serve their beloved Master. They came to nurse him and stayed to be fired with the ideals of monastic life.

Ramakrishna saw the potential leader in Narendranath. He scanned him thoroughly and observed: "Ordinary souls fear to assume the responsibility of instructing the world. A worthless piece of wood can only just manage to float, and if a bird settles on it, it sinks immediately. But Naren is different. He is like the great tree trunks, bearing men and beasts upon their bosom in the Ganges." Naturally, he entrusted to Narendranath the serious task of consolidating the holy brotherhood by looking after the spiritual growth of all the members of this group. Ramakrishna told him plainly one day, "I leave these young people in your charge. Busy yourself in developing their spirituality." The tender parental love of their Master

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and the pathos of the approaching end of his earthly life, together with the keen solicitude of their young chief for their well-being, goaded the young enthusiasts to make a desperate effort for reaching their goal. Forgetting everything about the world they plunged headlong into the depths of spiritual practice. Service of their beloved Master and a frenzied quest of spiritual truth absorbed their time and energy.

It was during this period that Narendranath was blessed with the transcendental experience of the Absolute through a spell of *nirvikalpa samādhi;* and as soon as he came back to the normal plane of consciousness, he was made aware of his life's mission by his Master's astounding announcement, "Now the Mother has shown you everything. But this revelation will remain under lock and key . . . . When you have accomplished the Mother's work you will find this treasure again." Three or four days before Ramakrishna passed away, he called Naren alone to his side, fixed his affectionate gaze upon him and became absorbed in an ecstasy. Naren's mind remained spell-bound for a while, after which he heard the Master saying rather piteously, "To-day I have given you my all, and now I am only a poor fakir possessing nothing. By this power you will do infinite good to the world and not until it is accomplished will you return." Thus did Ramakrishna charge Narendranath with his own spiritual power, which, certainly, was his *all,* the very warp and woof of the superb texture of his life. The spirit of the Master entered the temple of his

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disciple's body and perhaps lived over again, like the fabled phoenix, to continue the work he had begun, through the limbs of Vivekananda. On the last day of his life, August 15, 1886, Ramakrishna charged Narendranath repeatedly with the words, "Take care of these boys," before he entered into *samādhi* for the last time and left the mortal frame behind.

We shall see in a separate section how Narendranath, true to the charge laid on him by his beloved Master, tended his spiritual brothers with the utmost loving care and built up with their help the superstructure of the Ramakrishna Order of monks, of which the foundation had been so effectively laid by Ramakrishna's own hands.

THE BEACON LIGHT

The hurried survey of Ramakrishna's life made in the foregoing pages may appear to be rather bewildering to the modern mind. It contains many things that one does not expect to meet with in this age of critical reason and realistic common sense. His father's dream about his Divine origin, the ecstatic visions of his early age, his critical estimate of bread-winning education during a precocious adolescence, his frantic quest in youth after the supersensuous scriptural truths, his earnest and vigorous spiritual practices according to the directions of different schools of religion, his realization of God through every one of these diverse methods within an incredibly short period of time, spiritual uplift and illumination of his disciples by his

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benign and potent will, and lastly, his mysterious transmission of spiritual power into Narendranath on the eve of his passing away—all these surely lie beyond the range of normal experience. Even his almost unprecedented record of purity and love, his amazing syntheses of opposing phases of life, thoughts and emotions, his edifying contacts with the old-school scholars and devotees including his own *gurus* and also with the modern intellectuals, broadening their religious outlook by his message of Harmony of religions, dissemination of all the spiritual ideas and ideals upheld by some of the most important faiths of the world, inspiring his young disciples with the spirit of renunciation and infusing into Narendranath the idea of worshipping God through the service of suffering humanity—even these contain elements that our sophisticated minds are not prepared to accept without demur. The doubt that very naturally arises in a modern mind after a perusal of the previous sketch has to be solved before one may be in a position to take Ramakrishna's life on its face-value.

Are the incidents to be regarded as conscious stitches of the Divine Mother on the spiritual web of his life, as he himself would have us believe, or are they to be ascribed merely to accidental aberrations of Nature? Among the moderners, there are many who do not believe in anything outside the reach of the senses or the intellect, and look upon religion as an interesting pastime of puerile minds. To these bold free-thinkers the supernormal elements of Rama-

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krishna's life may appear like the dreamy stuff of a fairy-tale, or perhaps like the unmistakable symptoms of a psycho-neurotic patient. But before passing any such verdict, one should remember that the foregoing life-sketch is based on the historical data of the life of a person who lived almost before our eyes and some of whose disciples are yet alive, and one should pause to consider with a critical and unbiassed mind if through Ramakrishna's phenomenal life the world has encountered a fresh and convincing mass of evidence in favour of spiritual truths.

If there be any truth behind the apparently inspired utterances of the world's seers and prophets, if there be any correct information in the religious texts of the world about a higher and transcendent order of truths, which Ramakrishna claims to have realized in his life more tangibly and effectively than the physical and biological contents of the earth, how are we to ascertain it? This query requires a clear and straight answer.

Modern knowledge is undermining the grounds of atheism as surely and effectively as those of orthodox and dogmatic belief. Octavius B. Frothingham has perhaps depicted clearly the trend of modern thoughts by his pointed remark: "Definitions of God have been vanishing, idols have been tumbling, symbols have been falling away; but the Being has been steadily coming forward, from the background, looming up from the abyss." Even among the modern scientists there are many who have no hesitation in

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confessing poignantly with John Haynes Holmes: "I am not an atheist, for three reasons. Atheism is wholly dogmatic in its attitude towards life. Atheism is utterly negative in its approach to life. Atheism explains nothing, and this universe demands an explanation." The modern intellectuals are really becoming almost unanimous in admitting the reality of 'a logical ground of existence or a primary underlying substratum which sustains the universe,' and in believing 'that the order and movement of the universe suggest evidence of plan and purpose and cannot be attributed to good luck,' as Prof. Radhakrishnan has put it. It was this truth that Ralph Waldo Emerson voiced by his almost inspiring declaration: "Nature is too thin a screen; the glory of the Omnipresent God breaks through everywhere. Oh my brothers! God exists. There is a soul at the center of nature and over the will of man. Ineffable is the union of God and man in every act of the soul."

Ramakrishna, through his deep and extensive observations, discovered the fact, often ignored or misunderstood even by theologians, that it is to God as the primary underlying substratum, the final cause of the universe, that all religions, in spite of their distinct and apparent mythological and ritualistic crudities, aim at drawing our attention. If, according to his finding, God of the theologians be no other than the philosophers' 'logical ground of existence' and the final cause, then surely He lies beyond the scope of our category-ridden minds.

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The highest speculative achievements of such minds end in declaring God to be unknown and unknowable, or in presenting abstract ideas like those of an evolving Absolute or of a Cosmic Mind projecting the universe, or perhaps such minds may content themselves with the pragmatic values of theism in meeting the monotonous demands of the workaday world. The admission by the Agnostics of the supramental character of the Absolute makes religion a sealed book to the intellect; and the Idealists compromise with theism through intellectual abstractions cannot also be expected to bring us into living touch with the ultimate reality. The armed neutrality of the agnostics, the pacifistic pose of the Objective Idealist, the self-complacence of the Solipsist, the utilitarian outlook of the Pragmatist may be intellectual achievements of no mean order, but certainly none of these claims to be able to realize the nature of the underlying reality. Reason obviously fails to probe the cause of causation.

Empirical science, on the other hand, is engaged in discovering the immediate links of causation and is not concerned with the Final Cause. Yet undoubtedly the scientists have in recent years outgrown the materialistic and mechanistic view of the nineteenth century by resolving the units of matter into unseen and almost mysterious units of energy, blowing up the concepts of absolute time and space, welding the two kinds of interval into one imaginary entity called "time-space," speculating on a four-dimensional

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continuum, and by witnessing substantial aberrations of rigid determinism in the processes of physical nature. Professor Radhakrishnan has been perfectly right in stating, "The old categories of physics are not adequate even in the physical world, and purely mechanistic explanations of even the simplest living organisms are found impossible.....Spirit is the reality of the cosmic process." The epoch-making revelations of modern science have convinced even some of its distinguished votaries like Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington about the possibility of a cosmic mind as the efficient and material cause of the universe, and brought them almost in line with the Berkeleyan school of rational philosophy. It is an admitted fact that the analytical vision of Science has just seen through the outer crust of Nature and realized that the physical forms are projections of the mind on the unseen, and as yet undetermined, objective world of the physicist. And all that these empiricists can say about the objective reality outside the mind is through symbols and abstractions. Thus modern science, by its recent disclosures, has helped us, no doubt, to apprehend the non-material nature of the underlying reality, but certainly no one can expect that through its symbols of more than three dimensions or such other mathematical abstractions, it will ever be able to bring the non-material substratum, reality, within the range of our comprehension.

Hence it will not be unreasonable to hold that neither the speculations of the philosopher nor the

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theories and hypotheses of the scientist are able to make the intellect jump out of itself to measure its own cause. Yet 'there is an insistent demand in the human soul to come to terms with the unseen reality.' Nay more, 'so long as man is man, hoping and aspiring and reflecting on the meaning of existence and the responsibilities it entails,' so long as he will be haunted by his unending dreams of perfection, he must strive to have a firmer hold on reality. His very constitution makes it impossible for him to rest before he breaks through all barriers of knowledge and realizes, in and through the final cause, the fulfilment of his dreams of perfection. Rabindranath Tagore says, "In all departments of life man shows this dualism—his existence within the range of obvious facts and his transcendence of it in a realm of deeper meaning. Having this instinct inherent in his mind which ever suggests to him the crossing of the border, he has never accepted what is apparent as final, and his incessant struggle has been to break through the shell of his limitations." But intellect cannot be expected to fulfil these aspirations of the human mind.

It is a fact, however, that all the seers, sages and prophets of the world point at the spiritual intuition of a pure heart as the only approach towards the transcendental reality. And it is a fact that Ramakrishna claims to have verified their assertions by his own experiments and observations.

A moderner may, however, recoil from Ramakrishna's apparently anthropomorphic visions of the

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Final Cause in different forms of the Personal God and may not hesitate to equate these with hallucination. But since the same visions, with all their minute details, have been witnessed by countless seers before him, and since identical visions are held by them all to be open to any one who will strive seriously to attain these, the spiritual visions cannot surely be classed with the wild fantasies of a particular deranged brain. Moreover, far from giving rise to any reactionary wave of mental depression, as in the case of a drunkard or a delirious person, these visions were observed by Ramakrishna to have a far greater value than the phenomena of the physical world. Besides, he found that there was nothing mysterious or supernatural about the experiences of spiritual intuition. As a conveyor of knowledge, this mystic intuition or pure intelligence, as Ramakrishna used to call it, was observed by him to be a perfectly natural faculty of the human mind as much as the intellect and the senses, and its reports were found after crucial tests to be no less valid than those of the latter. Just as one has to train the intellect and even the senses according to pedagogic science before one may expect these to function properly, similarly one is required to develop this faculty of spiritual intuition through purity and concentration according to the directions of yogic science, which can be traced beneath the superficial trappings of every religion. By his own empiric observations with pure intelligence or spiritual intuition, Ramakrishna became convinced of the fact that any

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method of practical religion, if sincerely followed, was sure to develop this faculty that lies dormant in every person, and through it to lead him to visions of the Personal God in various forms. This is a perfectly humanistic and universal fact, as good as law, bearing on the development of a particular aspect of human nature and consequent possibilities of extension of the range of human knowledge beyond the normal scope of the unedified mind. The utterance of the prophet of Nazareth, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," is nothing but a bare statement of this fact.

Of course, compared with the Absolute, these visions of Personal God may look like illusory appearances, yet these can scarcely be held to be more illusory than the appearance of the physical world. Modern scientific findings have made it clear that it is admittedly the mind that has woven on the physicist's symbolic world of empty space and unseen specks of energy the rich and varied fancy of the sense-world of our experience, and has invested it with aesthetic and moral values. Really, it is not assemblages of electrons and protons, but the appearances projected on them by our mind, that give rise to our love or hatred, joy or misery, hope or disappointment. It is the mind that makes the beautiful rainbow emerge out of a multitude of ethereal waves and then proceeds to enjoy the beauty of its own creation. Just as the mind, in its ordinary mood, projects the ordinary forms on the unseen objective reality of the physical

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world, it calls up, in another purer and more sublime mood, a different order of visions, which we group together and label as mystic experience. Ramakrishna, like all other men of realization, found as much uniformity and causal sequence on the spiritual plane as on the physical, and discovered even the causal link between the two planes. He found that it was not the physical conditions that determined his mystic visions, as in the case of hallucination; rather, he witnessed the causal connection in the reverse order. He observed with empiric accuracy how events occurred in the physical world according to the will of his Divine Mother, as communicated to him through his visions.

If one intends seriously to estimate the worth of these visions, one has to rise to the spiritual plane and take one's readings on that height. Even physicists of this day hold that a reading of physical phenomena from any particular station in the universe cannot have an absolute value. According to these sponsors of Relativity, an object may be discerned to be red, blue or yellow, and an event may be deemed to be present, past or future by different observers looking through different frameworks of time and space. So no one can claim his own observation, even on the physical plane, to be the only correct one. Modern science does not warrant such claim. If this be true of readings in the physical world, and if the mystic world has any objective reality, then surely the possibility of error will increase enormously when anybody will try to

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evaluate the contents of the spiritual world from a fixed stand on the physical plane. It is not surprising, therefore, that a genuine spiritual vision may appear like hallucination when observed through a fixed framework of physical vision. But it is certainly surprising if any one claims such a reading to have an absolute value. What appears from the mundane standpoint to be a hallucination, may appear from the spiritual plane to be a clearer and more valid suggestion of the unseen reality than any phenomenon of the physical world. And this was exactly what Ramakrishna observed.

The appearances of the spiritual world drew him closer and closer to the ultimate reality. He assessed the truth of his mystic visions by his own observation and found in them the highest manifestations of the Final Cause capable of conferring upon man eternal joy, unbounded strength, spotless purity and even of leading him up to the brink of a transcendental realization of the supreme reality. While the physicist's gaze, piercing through the illusory appearances of the sense-world, halts before the four-dimensional continuum, the avenue of consciousness in the spiritual world led Ramakrishna through the mystic visions beyond even the superconscious state, when he realized the ultimate reality as the essence of his own being. Hence to him the spiritual visions appeared to be closer to reality than the things of this world, and from the comparatively greater amount of joy, purity, strength and illumination he derived from these

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visions, he gave them a greater value than the contents of sense-impressions.

The spiritual intuition of a pure heart does, however, appear to be a variable standard. Different seers actually meet with different visions. One cannot decide which of these conveys the final knowledge about reality. But Ramakrishna observed that the mystic intuition of a pure heart cannot impart finality to knowledge, in so far as it reveals only a glimpse of the reality, which lies beyond mind and beyond speech. Such mystic intuition was found by him to be only a stepping-stone to the supreme knowledge. It was only when he transcended both reason and intuition, symbolized by his cleaving of the Divine Mother's living form in his mind by the sword of discrimination, that his consciousness stepped out of all limits and realized its absolute identity with the eternal and unchangeable, nameless and formless substratum, reality. Ramakrishna used to say, "You have to draw out a thorn with another and then reject them both." With the visions wrought by *vidyā māyā* or spiritual intuition one has to free oneself from the tyranny of sense-impressions, and then one has to leave aside even the spiritual intuition and transcend the plane of mystic visions, before the individual soul is able to realize its identity with the eternal spirit.

Ramakrishna passed along the grand staircase of spiritual visions of the Personal God and stepped beyond his cramped individuality on to the realization of oneness with the eternal. The subject and object

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merged in one undivided existence, and nothing remained to differentiate the self-realization of the Absolute. But certainly the Absolute beyond time, space and causation cannot be objectified to one's consciousness through reason, intuition or imagination and hence cannot be known in this sense; yet the Absolute became 'more than known' to him, inasmuch as his own consciousness became one with it. With him the transcendental existence, instead of being merely a construction of philosophical speculation, mathematical abstraction or poetic imagination, became a tangible and living fact of experience through his frequent plunges in the ocean of nameless and formless reality. The fact of this realization, corroborating the findings of countless seers that form the basis of Advaita Vedānta, conclusively points out the possibility of realizing the Absolute. Rabindranath Tagore rightly said in the course of his Hibbert Lectures for 1930 on 'Religion of Man': "We have the age-long tradition in our country that through the process of Yoga man can transcend the utmost bounds of his humanity and find himself in a pure state of consciousness of his undivided unity with Parabrahman. There is none who has the right to contradict this belief; for it is a matter of direct experience and not of logic. It is widely known in India that there are individuals who have the power to attain temporarily the state of *samādhi*, the complete merging of the self in the infinite, a state which is indescribable." This realization of the absolute, undivided and

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undifferentiated oneness surely imparts finality to knowledge. When one, like Ramakrishna, peels the universe, physical as well as mental, layer after layer 'like an onion,' reaches the core of the phenomenal existence, stands face to face with the ultimate reality and becomes one with it, one is sure to confirm, after return to the plane of relative existence, the unambiguous utterance of the Vedic seer, *Ekaṁ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti* (Truth is one, sages call it by various names).

It was, moreover, this realization, beyond the reach of intellect or intuition, that made it possible for Ramakrishna to assess properly the worth of his mystic visions. He gave values to visions of the Personal God, as glimpses of the same absolute reality seen through the prism of an immaculate mind. Through his extensive observations of numerous and distinct God-visions in the course of his search along the different paths of religion, he found that these visions differed only in colour and outline, name and form, but they coincided thoroughly so far as the substance was concerned. In and through them all he had the unerring perception of the transcendental Absolute. The Formless appeared before his pure mind through Divine forms. To his clear vision the difference between the Personal God and the Impersonal was no more than that between ice and water, and the difference between the various forms of the Personal God appeared like that between the distinct forms of the same actor playing different rôles. This

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was why he could declare emphatically that through intuitive visions of the Personal God in various forms, devotees are blessed with a living touch of the self-same reality. Like the man of his parable under the tree watching the chameleon in all its varying colours, he confirmed the different one-sided reports of all casual observers. Hence, standing on the bed-rock of realization, he announced that all creeds, Hindu, Islamic, Christian or of any other denomination, based on monism, qualified monism or dualism, were like so many different paths that led alike to the same goal, namely, realization of God, the Final Cause of the universe, the Eternal Substratum, who is one and the same in spite of innumerable varieties of visions.

Moreover, he observed that his spiritual realization, far from contradicting reason, went to fulfil it. His mystic experiences brought fresh data from planes beyond the reach of the senses and left the intellect to study them and discover through them the truth of essential oneness behind all appearances. Thus did he comprehend that the entire diversity of appearances which we call nature was nothing but a manifestation of the selfsame Absolute—visions of the Personal God forming its apex and those of the physical world its base. All things of nature animate and inanimate appeared to him like sugar-dolls, composed essentially of the same substance though differing widely in form. Before his spiritual vision was unfolded such a majestic and magnificent oneness of the universe, towards which all sciences and all philosophies are surely and

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steadily converging. It is this realization of a living oneness that alone can furnish the world with the rationale behind the concept of equality and fraternity, and provide it with the basis on which it may build up the much-needed edifice of Universal Brotherhood.

Firm in his conviction, he declared, with all the emphasis that he could command, that it was up to any one to pursue in right earnest any of the methods of practical religion and observe with empiric accuracy the truth behind the statements of the world's spiritual teachers. When the intellect has been found incapable of unlocking the gate of the unseen reality, one will not surely lose anything by following Ramakrishna tentatively and preparing oneself for giving a fair trial to the intuitive method of religion. If, however, anybody still chooses to ignore religion as 'a pursuit of infantile minds' and to rely absolutely on sense-impressions and intellectual speculations, he will perhaps be evincing an almost superstitious regard for these inefficient means of knowledge, which do not hold out any promise of fulfilling the deeper and persistent aspirations of the human soul and setting at rest its ceaseless striving after perfection.

Indeed, the world has been sorely in need of a seer like Ramakrishna with such a fresh, brilliant, perfect and extensive record of spiritual experiences, in order to dispel the gathering clouds of doubt and reinstall the faith of humanity in the eternal Truth. Ramakrishna has appeared in the world at a psychological moment in the history of mankind. Human

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civilization is now passing through a phase of transition, and the old order of things is changing very fast. The traditional authority of seers, prophets and scriptures is being challenged and almost cornered by free-thinking and the findings of science. Age-old ideas and ideals are crumbling into dust; a process of critical enquiry, revaluation and readjustment is going on on all sides.

A belief almost of the nature of a superstition is in the air that science will unravel all the mysteries of the universe, and rational philosophy will interpret the findings of science and ascertain the plan, purpose and reality behind creation. Hence religion, as it stands, is considered by many to be a useless product of the dark ages of human ignorance; and in such religion they find nothing but bundles of irrational dogmas and meaningless ceremonials, and look upon it as something that is concerned more with imaginary worlds than with the hard and throbbing world before them. Hence they are not in a mood to accommodate such religion anywhere in the modern world except in the archaeological museum, where it may be preserved as an interesting relic of the barbarous past. The old symbols and ideology must go, and if the moderner is to have any religion, it must be evolved out of scientific and philosophical thoughts, and it must have nothing to do with mystery or supernaturalism.

There are others, of course, the fundamentalists, who have faith in credal religion. But most of them, unfortunately, have scarcely any regard for anything

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except the externals of religion, and have very little insight into the deeper and fundamental spiritual truths. Bereft of the realization of spiritual truths, they cling obdurately to the dogmas of their respective churches and refuse to open their eyes to see anything beyond these. Incapable of facing critical enquiry and rationalizing their faith, they often fulminate against the claims of reason and common sense on the strength of their personal belief. They scarcely realize the fact that 'to exempt religion from the spirit of criticism is a futile undertaking.' Besides, each group sticks fast to its own creed and regards it to be the sole repository of spiritual truth on earth. And this irrational, narrow and bigoted outlook has led the various sectarian creeds to divide humanity into so many hostile camps. Thus, so far as religion is concerned, the human society is torn between heresy and fanaticism, untrammelled reason on one side and unenlightened, rut-bound faith on the other.

Like religion, every other compartment of the social structure is being terribly shocked by the tremendous and reckless battering of freethinking upon the entire wisdom of the past. Traditional morality is rapidly losing its colour as well as outline, and it is in immediate danger of being swept altogether out of existence. There are some people who are out to blow up the 'old and rusty' connotation of the word 'chastity.' There is an insistent demand from certain quarters that unfettered sexual freedom should be made the rule of human life. Then there are some who are

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trying seriously to see if humanity can dispense altogether with the necessity of putting on clothes. Everywhere people appear to be seized with a craze for running after something new, something novel and daring—no matter how wild, shocking and preposterous it may be.

In the fields of economics and politics also one finds the same state of things. All thoughts about God, religion, morality or philanthropy are being ruled out of order from these spheres. All noble ideals are being safely dislodged by arrogance, heartlessness, selfishness and insincerity in the name of tact and expedience. The Moloch of national interest has to be appeased, and for this, humanity has to be bled white. Fight and competition between divergent and conflicting national interests are reducing the entire globe into a permanent war zone. Rightly has Monsieur Romain Rolland observed: "The whole of humanity seems to be given up to hatred, and war is actually raging or smouldering under the ashes everywhere between nations, between races and between classes."

Thus equating the entire experience of the past to zero, we are making everything about us, in every walk of our social life, shaky, confused and chaotic. Who knows if we are not rushing at a breakneck speed along a downward curve of evolution? One has reasons to apprehend that a certain section of humanity at the present moment is developing very rapidly unmistakable signs of atavism.

This in short is the world around us, and it was

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in such a world that Ramakrishna appeared as the very antithesis of all that we see about us. It was a conspicuous feature of his life that he valued those very things which the modern world is trying to ignore and set aside. Religion was the breath of his life, morality his backbone. In his perspective, realization of God was the worthiest object of life, and devotion, purity, sincerity, selflessness, love and humility constituted the real wealth of man, far superior in value and significance to anything of the external world. And he developed all these to a unique degree of perfection. In his life one finds an unsurpassed record of God-intoxication, spotless purity and surging love for humanity. And then with his mind broad as the sky, strong as adamant and pure as a crystal, he plumbed the depths of spirituality, collected the treasures of the entire wisdom of the past, tested their worth and re-invested them all with a fresh hall-mark of truth. From his lips the world hears the voice of the ancient prophets, in his life it discovers the meaning of the scriptures. Through his life and teachings man has got an opportunity of learning the old lessons afresh.

By his deep and extensive spiritual experience of the entire range of Upanishadic truths, Ramakrishna has surely heralded an epoch-making Hindu renaissance, which is expected to bring in its train a general spiritual upheaval all over the world. He discovered the wonderful spirit of catholicism within the sealed bosom of Hinduism and released it through his own realizations to spread all over the globe and liberalize

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all communal and sectarian views. His advent marks a new era in the evolution of religion, when all sects and all communities, keeping intact the individual characteristics of their faiths, will transcend the limitations of narrow and sectarian outlook and thus pave the path for a universal Brotherhood.

By touching the entire gamut of spiritual experience, Ramakrishna has produced a marvellous and magnificent Harmony of Religions that has already attracted thousands of human hearts from all corners of the earth towards his life and teachings. His spiritual experience and message have their appeal to all men of all countries. In and through the language of his life have been expressed the loftiest, soul-stirring and universal ideas and ideals of practical religion that pierce through the hard crust of creed and colour obsessions and reach the core of the heart of humanity. This was why the late lamented French savant Dr. Sylvain Levi rightly observed: "As Ramakrishna's heart and mind were for all countries, his name too is a common property of mankind."

It is not surprising, therefore, that M. Romain Rolland, though not a believer in the doctrine of Divine Incarnation, regards Ramakrishna as a man-god of the order of Buddha or Christ. There are others like Sir Francis Younghusband, who look upon him as a sovereign mystic, as one of the galaxy of perfected souls forming the vanguard in the spiritual march of humanity. Through his superhuman power of transmitting spirituality by a mere glance, touch or

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will, through his phenomenal syntheses of contradictory phases of life, thoughts and emotions, of *bhakti* and *jñāna,* work and renunciation, *gārhasthya* (life of a householder) and *sannyāsa,* and through his almost unprecedented measure of selfless love and purity, Swami Vivekananda saw in him the highest expression of Divinity on the human plane, a combination of the intellect of Śaṅkarāchārya and the heart of Buddha or Śrī Chaitanya. And we have already observed how the old-school scholars and devotees like Gaurikanta, Padmalochan and the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī detected in him the scriptural signs of a Divine Incarnation.

It is difficult to decide which of these readings is the nearest representation of truth. It is clear, however, that there are substantial grounds, rational as well as scriptural to make even enlightened people convinced of the fact that Ramakrishna, far from being a fit subject for pathological investigation, has contributed through his life something very precious for the spiritual regeneration of mankind. Through all the different readings of him taken by persons belonging really to the first rank of intellectuals, of the modern as well as of the old school, one thing has become very clear, namely, that when humanity, in the midst of a chaos and confusion of ideals, clashes and conflicts of interests, was about to lose its hold on religion, Ramakrishna's blazing life of realizations suddenly appeared like a new and very bright luminary in the spiritual firmament of the world. Instead of racking our brains

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to determine finally the exact position and magnitude of this luminary, the human society will do well to read in its light the value and significance of the spiritual lore handed down to it by the great teachers of the past. In the light of this resplendent life the rationale behind all religions and the precious nuggets of truth embedded in all creeds have been revealed, and this revelation may be expected to convince the modern empiricists, as also the rationalists of all schools, of the values of religion.

It is encouraging to notice that a voice, though very feeble, has been raised in the modern world by a distinguished band of thinkers, poets, philosophers and scientists, a voice that is tending to rationalize the wisdom of the seers and prophets and thus to lift up the eyes of mankind towards spirituality. Of course, at the present moment the voice appears to be almost drowned in the din and bustle of the frenzied rush of humanity towards rank materialism; still this voice of reason cannot long be trifled with. It is sure to grow in volume and intensity and get a wider hearing. The more this voice becomes audible, the more will humanity be in a position to understand correctly the import of Ramakrishna's life as a beacon light that has appeared at a critical moment in the history of man in order to illumine the upward path of human civilization and thus to help it out of the present welter of cultural ideals and direct it towards a great world-wide spiritual awakening. It was given to Vivekananda, the illustrious leader of his young disciples, to realize

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such an import of Ramakrishna's phenomenal life and to announce to the world, in his trumpet voice, the thrilling tidings of such a glorious future.

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III

Swami Vivekananda and Spiritual Federation

Ramakrishna's dynamic counterpart

We have noticed how Ramakrishna had recognized in Narendranath a potential leader of men, entrusted to him the serious responsibility of tending his brother-disciples, inspired him to dedicate himself entirely to the service of humanity, and finally, by transmitting his own spiritual power into him, became spiritually one with his disciple. We have also observed that it was Vivekananda who grasped the deeper imports of Ramakrishna's life and broadcasted the same practically all over the world.

He verified the truth of his Master's message by his own experiments and observations, and then, with a firm conviction born of his own realizations, he presented, amplified and elucidated before the world the precious lessons he had learnt at the feet of Ramakrishna. He made, moreover, important practical deductions from the Master's message, that might go to exalt both individual as well as collective life. Ramakrishna had lived to impart by his realization a fresh sanction to the time-honoured spiritual practices lying embedded in all the scriptures of the world and to point at them as so many paths of individual perfection, and Vivekananda lived to expound to the

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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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world the same message, and also to show why and how sincere and systematic endeavour for individual perfection should be made the very basic structure of human civilization. He analysed the deeper aspirations of the human heart, scanned its doubts and confusions, and traced the causes of its failures and untold miseries; moreover, he studied the entire course of human progress through centuries, searched the causes of its alternate curves of rise and fall, compared different epochs of cultural advance, and weighed in the balance of unsophisticated reason the various ideals of human civilization; and from all these data he discovered and pointed out to humanity the path that might lead it to a glorious future.

Through the voice of the disciple, the world is really listening to the voice of the master, and is gradually realizing the bearing of Ramakrishna's life and teachings on the cultural life of humanity. The two lives practically make one complete whole. The disciple is the dynamic counterpart of the Master. If the life of the Master be a book of revelations, that of his worthy apostle is its appropriate commentary and a compendious guide-book on its practical application.

Indeed, like Bhagīratha of Hindu mythology, Vivekananda brought down the clear and vitalizing stream of spirituality from the celestial heights and seclusion of Ramakrishna's life, and made it break through the cliffs of doubt and scepticism and rush down hills and valleys in an ever-widening mighty current, inundating the unhealthy slime and cesspools

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of sordid thoughts and enriching the soils of the earth with a fresh, charming and vigorous life of spirituality. In the previous section, we have watched the river at its source, and presently we shall observe how Vivekananda grew up to lead its course down to the plane of modern thoughts.

THE ROCK OF ADAMANT

'Vivekananda' was the monastic name of Narendranath Datta, who was born on the 12th January, 1863, in an aristocratic Kshatriya family of Calcutta, the then capital of India. His mother was a spirited and accomplished lady with an air of majesty in her demeanour, and his father an enlightened freethinker with liberal views, a compassionate heart and a leaning towards an ostentatious and rather extravagant mode of living. In all these details Narendranath differed widely from his spiritual Master, whose home environment, as we have noticed, was marked by rustic simplicity.

The contrast was, perhaps, no less prominent in their physical constitution, temperament and cultural training. As opposed to Ramakrishna's delicate physique and almost feminine grace, Narendranath, with his strong and athletic build, was Promethean in vigour and thoroughly masculine in deportment. Through systematic courses of physical culture, Narendranath became an adept in wrestling and boxing, as much as in racing, riding and swimming. Among his companions he made himself conspicuous

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by his bold and free movements, loving heart, and straight and unconventional manners. If Ramakrishna displayed the *sāttvika* (serene) trait of the true Brāhmin, his disciple had all the *rājasika* (active) signs of a true-born Kshatriya. Narendranath too, like his spiritual master, was a lover of music. But unlike the inspired dreamer Sri Ramakrishna, who only sang pieces gleaned from the strolling minstrels, in tunes picked up from the wayside, this enthusiastic realist underwent a prolonged course of regular training under able guides till he qualified himself as a master of vocal and instrumental music. While Ramakrishna refused to engage himself seriously in picking up the bare essentials of the three R's in a primary school, Narendranath came to be a full-fledged university graduate. At college he impressed his professors and compeers by the extraordinary versatility of his genius and made his mark as a powerful controversialist. However, even from his childhood he had a religious bent of mind, and in this, surely, he resembled his master. In the immature age when boys find nothing more interesting than play, Narendranath delighted in spending long hours in a meditative pose before clay images of God.

But in adolescence, he grew up to be a rationalist to the core of his being. The pre-eminent note of reason in modern thoughts appealed to him very strongly, and he applied himself for a time to master the contents of serious English literature. He was at heart a seeker of truth. But his nature rebelled against

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the idea of accepting anything on faith. His reason had to be satisfied by convincing and incontrovertible evidence, before he could bend to recognize the validity of a statement, scriptural or scholastic. He pored over books, discussed with scholars and churchmen, overwhelmed amateur and professional lecturers on religious topics with sallies of penetrating questions, but nowhere did he find adequate light for solving his own sincere doubts about the ultimate verities of life and existence. Finding idealism as inefficient to fulfil his craving for truth as agnosticism or positivism, he surrendered himself for a time to the popular, refined and considerably christianized tenets of the Brāhmo Samāj, propounded by the illustrious Keshab Chandra, who was then at the height of his glory. But the intense yearning of his searching soul could not compromise itself with all that this enlightened creed held out to him, and he literally smarted under the pressure of disappointment. In his restlessness he went about the city to meet religious worthies, but from nobody did he receive anything that could convince him about the existence of God and the possibility of man for attaining perfection.

When, baffled in his attempt, this precocious, rationalistic seeker of truth had reached almost the verge of scepticism, he met the great saint of Dakshineswar accidentally in the house of a Brāhmo devotee. This was in November, 1881, when he had hardly completed his eighteenth year and had been in college for about two years. Ramakrishna became

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highly impressed by Narendranath's religious songs, and perhaps his penetrating gaze discerned something behind the charmingly melodious voice which convinced him of the immense potentialities that lay dormant in the heart of the meteoric youth. He attracted Narendranath forthwith within his own orbit by inviting him to visit the Dakshineswar temple. This chance meeting of the two souls really proved to be pregnant with all the possibilities of Narendranath's subsequent career.

The meeting of Ramakrishna with Narendranath, which ended eventually in their spiritual union, appears, moreover, to symbolize the meeting of the ancient culture with the modern, scriptural faith with imperious reason, mysticism with positivism. Behind their Indian skin and complexion were two souls representing two different types of cultural groups, one clinging credulously to the scriptural ideology of the old days and the other getting itself freed from all trammels of dogma. If Ramakrishna expressed the spirit of the East, Narendranath, at the time of the meeting, was dominated by that of the West. Through the subsequent union of these two souls, one really sees a contradiction, though of course in spirit, of Kipling's cynical and absurd prophecy.

Ramakrishna was a seer of spiritual truths. He proved to his entire satisfaction the veracity of prophets and scriptures. He believed more intensely in the reports of his spiritual intuition than in the findings of the senses and intellect. All these three faculties,

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each kept within its proper functional limits, helped him to survey heaven and earth with equal ease and accuracy, and unfolded before his vision a bigger, harmonized, undivided and deified picture of the 'mysterious universe.' This vision opened in his heart a perennial fountain of love, concord and amity. His serene, contented and loving soul with its deep and extensive range of knowledge typified verily the acme of perfection. His conviction reminds one of the inspired Upanishadic seer who announced to all beings steeped in ignorance: "Listen, ye children of Immortality, ye that dwell on earth and on higher planes, I have realized the Supreme Self, the resplendent One beyond the pale of dismal ignorance, realizing whom one can transcend death (all forms of bondage), for which there is no other way open." Indeed Ramakrishna revealed through his life the spirit of Hinduism at its best and highest, and represented the very ideal of Indian aspiration.

Narendranath, on the other hand, when he met Ramakrishna for the first time, represented the searching, analytical, rationalistic, truth-seeking, vigorous spirit of the modern West. He was a votary of reason and had absolutely no faith in church dogmas, sentimental effusions and apparently meaningless ceremonials. He could not regard ecstatic vision as anything more than hallucination. He was, undoubtedly, a seeker of reality; but even in the spirit and technique of his search, he resembled more a scientist or philosopher of the Western world than a spiritual aspirant

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of the Indian type. He had waded tirelessly through the path of intellect under the implicit guidance of European thinkers of great repute; he had mastered and made a critical estimate of different systems of Western philosophy, and he had even had the audacity of communicating to Herbert Spencer his own original criticisms on the findings of the famous sponsor of rational thinking. John Stuart Mill's writings had revealed before his eyes the face of evil in nature, which had scraped off the thin veneer of Brāhmo theism from his mind and shocked his inner self severely, and he had gone about searching the archives of Western thought for an idea or inspiration with which he might console himself. He had tried the impassioned pantheism of Shelley, the spiritual raptures of Wordsworth, and had for a time tested the worth of an adventitious medley of the pure monism of Vedānta, the objective idealism of Hegel together with the basic ideals of the French Revolution—liberty, equality and fraternity. None of these could satisfy him for long, and in his restless and disappointing search for a solacing idea about the verities of life, his imperious reason had brought him almost in line with a confirmed atheist. He had developed grave doubts about the existence of God, and his mind was not credulous enough to trust the reports of accredited seers and and saints about their beatific visions. It was not a craving for God-vision like that of a Hindu spiritual aspirant, but a passionate urge for finding unbounded peace and unrestricted knowledge, that tormented the

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soul of this precocious enthusiast. Such was Narendranath, a thoroughbred, up-to-date moderner equipped culturally with all that the rationalistic and freethinking West could give, when he rushed by chance into the orbit of Ramakrishna, a contemporary sponsor of all that the hoary faith of the Hindus stood for.

Shortly afterwards Narendranath visited the saint within the golden shell of his sanctuary and tried to vivisect him with his scalpel of reason, which had been sharpened so carefully on the whetstone of modern thoughts. With all his critical faculties on the alert, he observed Ramakrishna minutely, weighed his words and thoughts cautiously, and scrutinized his conduct as thoroughly as he could. He put before the sage his straight, earnest and crucial query, tersely and pointedly: "Sir, have you seen God?" He expected, perhaps, a negative, dubious or devious reply, as he had so long received from all acclaimed seers whom he had approached with this challenge. This time, however, the young rationalist was stunned by a prompt, unexpected and amazingly unambiguous reply in the affirmative: "Yes, I see Him just as I see you here, only in a sense much more intense." In a state of bewildering surprise he listened to what followed: "God can be realized; one can see and talk to Him as I am doing with you. But who cares to do so? People shed torrents of tears for their wife and children, for wealth and property, but who does so for the sake of God? If one weeps sincerely for Him, He surely manifests Himself." The simple, clear and

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spontaneous outpourings of Ramakrishna's heart had the effect of impressing the sincerity of his conviction upon Narendranath, though of course he was not yet prepared for accepting all that he had said. Narendranath has left a record of this impression in the following words: "For the first time I found a man who dared to say that he had seen God, that religion was a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world. As I heard these things from his lips, I could not but believe that he was saying them not like an ordinary preacher, but from the depths of his own realizations."

In spite of his instinctive reverence for the saint's spiritual conviction, Narendranath's realistic frame of mind got a rude shock on that very day when Ramakrishna called him aside, showered upon him an unexpected measure of affection, and addressed him in the perfectly familiar tone of an old and very dear acquaintance, referring, all the while, to strange, unintelligible and mysterious things purporting to be the antecedents of his own earthly career. These utterances appeared to him like the ravings of a maniac. He, however, was quick enough to place the saint as an extraordinarily pure and genuine soul with an adamantine faith and a loving heart, but having a screw loose somewhere in the head. He came away that day from the holy sage with a confused feeling of unstinted reverence for his unimpeachable sanctity mixed with lurking doubts about his absolute sanity. Obviously his empirical mind was puzzled by the

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astoundingly novel and conflicting experiences during his first interview with the saint at Dakshineswar, and he could not come to any definite conclusion regarding the latter's worth and capability in helping him in any way in his search for reality.

Yet an unaccountable and tremendous attraction urged him to repeat his visit to the saint within a month. This time he had an occasion of witnessing, to his utter dismay, the wonderful potency of Ramakrishna's touch, which made everything about him swim and spin before his eyes and dissolve into empty space. He felt as if he was facing death and cried out in consternation, "What are you doing? I have parents at home." This drew a genial laugh from the saintly wizard of Dakshineswar and made him pass his hand over Narendranath's breast with the remark, "All right. Let us leave it at that for the moment." Immediately, to his infinite surprise and relief, Narendranath regained his normal vision. Barring this incident, Ramakrishna's behaviour towards him on that day had nothing unusual about it. Narendranath's critical mind interpreted the uncommon experience as a temporary spell wrought by some sort of hypnotic power exercised by the saint. Considering the fact that he possessed a robust physique and a very strong and indomitable mind, he could not but marvel at the immensity of Ramakrishna's mesmeric power. But, so far as the spiritual greatness of Ramakrishna was concerned, Narendranath was not yet in a position to come to any definite conclusion.

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The next visit followed very quickly, and on this occasion Ramakrishna's powerful touch steeped Narendranath immediately in a trance. While he remained in that state, the Master elicited from his inner mind whatever he wanted to know about his antecedents and whereabouts, his mission in this world and the duration of his earthly life. The information thus received tallied completely with Ramakrishna's foreknowledge about these things. Regarding this incident the Master afterwards said to his disciples, "I asked him several questions while he was in that state. He dived deep into himself and gave fitting answers to my questions. They only confirmed what I had seen and inferred about him. These things shall be a secret, but I came to know that he was a sage who had attained perfection, a past master in meditation, and that the day he learned his own past he would give up the body by an act of will." Recovering his outward consciousness, Narendranath found Ramakrishna gently stroking his chest, and he knew nothing about what had transpired during the trance.

Narenrdranath was very much impressed by Ramakrishna's inscrutable and overwhelming power, and he felt a great attraction towards the sage. But while his heart swayed towards the Master, his intellect guarded its independence jealously and would not permit him to be befooled by any form of probable charlatanry. He would not accept any word of the Master before sifting it thoroughly through his own critical enquiry. He would have nothing to do with Rama-

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krishna's panegyrics about the Divine Mother, or other gods and goddesses, or even about the Nirguṇa Brahman of Advaita Vedānta, before he could satisfy his own reason by adequate evidence on behalf of their existence. He held in undisguised contempt the credulity and sentimental effusions of Ramakrishna's devout and faithful followers, who had no hesitation in accepting every word of the Master as gospel truth. He was ruthless in his denunciation of many spiritual ideas and tendencies of the Hindus as nothing but crass superstition and barbarous fanaticism, and he did not feel any scruple to level his biting sarcasm even at the Hindu scriptures. He dared even to challenge Ramakrishna's sanity during his ecstatic visions and asked him with piercing frankness, "How do you know that your realizations are not the creations of your sick brain, mere hallucinations?" He would not even hesitate to go so far as to torture Ramakrishna's naive mind with such stinging questions as, "Why do you love me so much? Does it not look like infatuation for a creature and may it not bring you down from your spiritual height?" Indeed, before his proud intellect could bend itself before the Master's spiritual wisdom, it had asserted itself with all the poignant and disruptive vigour of Voltaire and Swift combined. Perhaps his intellect by its excessive and audacious zeal tried to put a brake on his heart, which had been pulling him with powerful and incomprehensible force towards the holy saint of Dakshineswar.

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In fact, during this period, Narendranath's inner life became a tumultuous scene of continued and implacable war between his domineering intellect and spiritually disposed heart. It was this heart that had resisted, by its disapprobation and dissatisfaction, his intellect's unrestricted march towards the cultural ideas of the modern West, and now it was his intellect that stood in the way of his heart's outgoing impulses for owning allegiance to the age-old spiritual ideals of India.

Narendranath's intellectual predilection for positivism did not, however, ruffle Ramakrishna's equanimity. By the grace of his Divine Mother, Ramakrishna had the prescience that Narendranath's mind would be illumined with true knowledge in due time, and he went on treating him as cordially and affectionately as ever, knowing full well that he loved him so much only because he saw God in him. He appreciated and even enjoyed Narendranath's pungent polemics issuing, as he knew, out of a bed of intellectual sincerity. He would even stimulate the young rationalist's critical spirit by such encouraging words addressed to his disciples as, "Do not accept anything because I say so. Test everything for yourselves." Thus did the Master, in his almost infinite affection and patience, give Narendranath a very long rope to indulge in free and sincere expression of his own thoughts, no matter how impudently aspersive and iconoclastic these might appear to other people about him.

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BORING THE ROCK

Slowly and steadily, through repeated contacts with the Master, Narendranath, who had started with almost Cartesian doubt about all his experiences in connection with Ramakrishna, began to discover his own errors of judgement. The Master, who had appeared to him, at first sight, as a monomaniac swayed by an exuberance of pure emotions, gradually overawed him by his supreme mastery of the intellectual realm as well. By closer observation he found that in Ramakrishna's attitude as a spiritual teacher there was nothing that might shock his own passionate loyalty to reason. The sage was perfectly rational in his method of approach towards his spiritual pupils and in presenting before them his own knowledge. He appeared, in his unassuming and liberal pose, more like a fact-finding and liberty-giving modern savant than a dictatorial spiritual preceptor of the traditional stamp. His utterances, of course, contained many things that might be unintelligible to the novice, but these were not thrust upon anybody's faith by the mere weight of authority; they were, instead, placed before his disciples as gleanings of his own realizations to be tested and verified by their own experience. He pointed out to them experimental methods according to the various recipes of religion, and even selected different methods for different individuals according to their taste, temperament and capacity. His method was based on a deep and extensive knowledge of

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human psychology, and it never contradicted reason. Through all these as well as through the piercing logic of Ramakrishna's repartee, the stupefying harmony of reason and creative imagination behind his illuminating analogies and parables, Narendranath saw the intellectual counterpart of Ramakrishna's ecstatic exterior, and wondered at this extraordinary combination of heart and intellect. In later days he referred to this and juxtaposed it to his own temperamental outlook by the following epigram: "Outwardly he was all Bhakta, but inwardly all Jñānin . . . . I am the exact opposite." Thus his initial scoffing turned gradually into praying. The rock of adamant became moistened and began to yield to the operation of the master-borer.

Narendranath, with all the ardour of his impetuous soul, started an enthusiastic career of spiritual practice, in order to verify the worth of Ramakrishna's instructions by his own realization. He took up different modes of spiritual *sādhanā* prescribed by the Master, considering these to be serious and perfectly rational experiments, and put his heart and soul into them.

During this period, the change that came upon Narendranath amounted to nothing less than an astounding and unthinkable *volte-face*. Regarding this credal somersault, late Brajendranath Seal, one of the leading rationalists of modern India, who happened for a time to be the 'friend, philosopher and guide' of young Narendranath, recorded his own impression by the following scholarly exclamation: "I watched

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with intense interest the transformation that went on under my eyes. The attitude of a young rampant Vedāntist-*cum*-Hegelian-*cum*-Revolutionary like myself towards the cult of religious ecstasy and Kālī-worship may be easily imagined; and the spectacle of a born iconoclast and freethinker like Vivekananda, a creative and dominating intelligence, a tamer of souls, himself caught in the meshes of what appeared to me an uncouth, supernatural mysticism, was a riddle which my philosophy of the Pure Reason could scarcely read at the time."

One day, Narendranath and some of his spiritual brothers were amusing their imagination with Ramakrishna's Vedāntic idea of Divine Immanence, which appeared to them very funny and ridiculously hyperbolic. They made specific deductions such as, "This jug is God! . . . and these flies are God," and roared with laughter. Ramakrishna in an ecstatic mood stepped into the room, approached Narendranath and touched him. At once Narendranath's sense-world became transformed radically into a deified universe; everywhere and in everything, animate or inanimate, he perceived the existence of an all-pervading Pure Consciousness and Bliss. Even when he went home, the vision of God in everything that he saw or touched, persisted; and he spent several days in this mood of spiritual ecstasy.

In 1884 his father died leaving his family in debt and abject penury. Narendranath, being the eldest of his brothers, had to exert himself to his utmost to face

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the distressing situation boldly and squarely. A serious and pathetic struggle for bare existence ensued; and it brought the young truth-seeker in touch with the stern realities of life. The arm-chair philosophy of his adolescence as also the recently developing faith of his maturer youth under the inspiration of the holy sage of Dakshineswar were equally dashed to pieces by the shock of his disillusionment about the world around him. Beneath the glitter and polish of the surface, the society appeared to him like a stenching and nauseating corpse. His depressing contact with the heartless inner life of the society made him a misanthrope and drove him to the exasperating limit of defying both the world and its Maker. The following harrowing tale of his sad experience told with cynical frankness shows clearly how want of sympathy had stabbed his proud heart and made his head reel: "I almost died of hunger. Barefoot I wandered from office to office, repulsed on all sides. I gained experience of human sympathy. This was my first contact with the realities of life. I discovered that it had no room for the weak, the poor, the deserted. Those who several days before would have been proud to help me, turned away their faces, although they possessed the means of rendering help. The world seemed to me to be the creation of a devil. One burning day, when I could hardly stand upon my feet, I sat down in the shade of the Monument. Several friends were there, and one began to sing a hymn about the abundant grace of God. It was like a blow aimed

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deliberately at my head. I thought of the pitiable condition of my mother and brothers, and cried: 'Stop singing that song. Such fantasies may sound pleasant in the ears of those who are born with a silver spoon in their mouth, and whose parents are not at home dying of hunger. Oh yes, there was a time when I too thought like that! But now that I am faced with all the cruelty of life, it rings in my ears like deadly mockery.' My friend was hurt. He could not make allowance for my terrible distress. More than once, when I saw that there was not enough food to go round at home, I went out, telling my mother that I was invited elsewhere, and I fasted. My rich friends sometimes asked me to go to their houses to sing, but practically not a single one of them showed any curiosity about my misfortunes; and I kept them to myself. . . ."

His faith in the existence of a just and merciful God in a world where millions die of starvation, was shaken to the core. The sceptic in him jumped up from the deeper layers of his mind, where it had retired before the invasion of Ramakrishna's conquering spirituality, and it asserted itself in openly denying any good or gracious existence beneath such an apparently diabolical world. The shock of the realistic touch of the evil in nature, which he had but dimly foreseen in the course of his intellectual survey of John Stuart Mill's works, came upon him with a disruptive violence. Indeed this experience of appalling poverty and the heartless apathy of his fellow-beings worked

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almost like dynamite to bore through the upper stratum of his comfortably intellectual life and draw out from within the sulphurous deposit of deep-seated spiritual doubts. For a time he vomited nothing but suffocating smoke and molten lava! His words fell like bomb-shells upon theism of all shades. With his imperious and rebellious mind, he stood up like an open challenge against God and religion.

His friends and relatives misunderstood him. They could not realize at the moment that his atheistic fulmination was nothing but a necessary discharge of the explosive materials just under the lid, that covered the perennial spring of beatitude within his heart. Hence people were not wanting to slander him as an incorrigible infidel and even as a probable rake. Ramakrishna, however, had unshakable faith in him, and he waited patiently for the psychological moment when Narendranath would exhaust of himself the superficial atheistic contents of his mind. Regarding this attitude of unbounded love and patience of the Master he said afterwards, "Ramakrishna was the only one who had unswerving faith in me. Even my mother and brothers were not capable of it. His unshakable confidence in me joined me to him for ever. He alone knew the meaning of love."

After a fairly long period of continued suffering, Narendranath, when he had reached an extreme state of physical and mental exhaustion, perceived to his utter surprise the first and almost miraculous rush of spiritual current from within. The menstruum of

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spiritual knowledge suddenly oozed out through the leak that had just been made in the attenuated lid, and in an instant it dissolved the entire residue of his doubts and confusions. By an intuitive flash he found the rationale that could reconcile Divine graciousness with the miseries of the world, and he felt relieved. Bathed in ineffable peace, he sprang up with the lightness of a fawn from the wayside open verandah where he had sunk down in inordinate despair and physical fatigue. He intuitively realized that the life of a householder was not meant for him.

He resolved to renounce the world; and on the very day he wanted to slip away, he met Ramakrishna in a devotee's house in Calcutta. At the Master's express desire Narendranath accompanied him to Dakshineswar and spent the night there. Ramakrishna read his mind like an open book; and he asked him not to renounce the world so long as he was alive. Narendranath was moved to tears by the Master's appeal, and he revised his resolution according to the Master's wish. He went back to his family and again commenced his tireless search for employment. He picked up a few temporary jobs, one after another, but he could not secure any permanent and substantial office on which the members of his family might depend. One day, at Dakshineswar, at the suggestion of the Master he attempted thrice to pray to the Divine Mother for improving the financial condition of his family. But each time he approached the Divine Mother in the temple, he felt Her living presence, and

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in his ecstatic fervour of love and faith, he forgot all about his distressed family and prayed only for knowledge and devotion, discrimination and renunciation. After this, Ramakrishna, however, assured him that by the grace of God, his mother and brothers would find just enough means to make both ends meet.

From this day he became a new man and practically started on a new career. His atheistic reactions were over, and his faith coming from within the depth of his heart coloured and controlled all his thoughts, words and deeds. From this day, when he perceived the Divine presence of Kālī in the temple and experienced the ecstatic and exalted mood of bliss and illumination that followed, he had the conviction up to the end of his life that "it is the heart that reaches the goal. . . . A pure heart sees beyond the intellect; it gets inspired; it knows things that reason can never know. . . . The pure heart is the best mirror for the reflection of truth, . . . as soon as it is pure, all truths flash upon it in a minute," and that "what we really want is head and heart combined." Thus the confirmed votary of Pure Reason grasped the value and significance of the spiritual intuition of a pure heart, which alone can unlock the gate of the unseen Reality. His reason yielded to faith, his domineering intellect became a submissive and faithful ally of his pure heart; and it was this wonderful alliance that made Vivekānanda what he was.

This new outlook enabled him to surrender himself completely to the Master. Realizing the supreme

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efficacy of spiritual intuition and the perfect mastery of the same by Ramakrishna, he slackened his stubborn hold on the proud intellect and engaged himself with persevering tenacity in opening wide the gate of spiritual knowledge under the benign guidance of his beloved Master. The process of checking and testing Ramakrishna's words came to an end; the operations of the check-valve of intellect over his pure heart appeared to be superfluous and almost ridiculous; and he gladly and enthusiastically allowed his heart to undergo the boring process, which had already gone deep enough to give him a glimpse and a foretaste of the spiritual spring below.

His firsthand knowledge of abject poverty and also of the heartlessness of the people about him, which instead of weighing him down for ever had eventually landed him unawares on the realm of spiritual experience, lost its personal sting and became sublimated into an intense feeling of sympathy for all the poor and downtrodden people on earth. The bed of a stream of humanitarianism was thus excavated in his heart by his own contact with misery, and the moment he heard his Master's soul-stirring message of apotheosizing suffering humanity, a mighty river of Divine love leaped up into existence and bent its course towards heaven, from man the miserable object of pity to man the manifestation of Divinity. It was this widening of his heart by the erosion of poverty, combined with the spiritualizing of it by his Master's inspiration, that led him afterwards to proclaim to the world his epoch-

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making faith in deified humanity: "The only God in whom I believe is the sum total of all souls, and above all, I believe in my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races."

We have observed already how during the last days of the Master in the Cossipore villa, Narendranath together with his brother-disciples dived deep into spiritual practice. It was during this period, when he was about twenty-three years of age, that a glimpse of beatitude calmed his surging humanitarian instinct, dimmed, for a time, even his hallowed vision of deified humanity, and stirred up in him an inordinate passion for merging his soul completely in a transcendental union with the Absolute Reality through *nirvikalpa samādhi* and remaining absorbed in that state for ever. For this he prayed to the Master, and we know how one day his consciousness stepped suddenly out of all limits and became one with the Supreme Brahman, and how, after its descent, Ramakrishna charged him with the mission of his life. He pointed out to him that it was not for him to harbour individualism to the extent of remaining constantly absorbed in spiritual ecstasy, and that his mission consisted in serving mankind as a lever for its spiritual uplift. When Narendranath told him, "Master, I was happy in *samādhi*. In my infinite joy I had forgotten the world. I beseech you to let me remain in that state," the Master turned his gaze by a jerk from the dream of his personal joy to that of all souls on earth, from spiritual individualism to universalism, by the following words: "For

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shame! how can you ask such things? I thought you were a vast receptacle of life, and here you wish to stay absorbed in personal joy like an ordinary man! . . . This realization will become so natural to you, by the grace of the Mother, that in your normal state you will realize the One Divinity in all beings; you will do great things in the world; you will bring spiritual consciousness to men, and assuage the misery of the humble and the poor." In the light of the Master's words, Narendranath grasped the importance, urgency and seriousness of rendering spiritual service to mankind and resolved to sacrifice even the intense bliss of transcendental union with the Supreme Self. But such is the attraction of the beatitude of Advaita realization that his mind tended constantly to dissolve in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, and he had to turn this mind outwards by a stupendous exertion of his will in order to carry out his Master's injunction. The rest of his life was, after a few violent oscillations at the beginning, a wonderful resultant of these two tremendous forces, and it may be described in his own words as 'intense activity in the midst of eternal calmness.' His heart, standing midway between the Absolute and the relative, was swayed constantly by a surging love for deified humanity, and yet at times it would be stilled into a perfectly calm lake mirroring the transcendental glory of the Formless Divinity and shutting out the world with all its contents. Thus selfless love for God in man and absorption in God impersonal came to be the two spiritual terminuses between which his conscious-

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ness plied. Convinced by his own realization of the spiritual value of his Master's injunction to him, he combined, in later days, the twin ideals of individual salvation and universal well-being while framing the motto of the Ramakrishna Order of monks.

Thus, after working slowly, imperceptibly and perseveringly for nearly six years on the adamantine rock of Narendranath's heart, Ramakrishna bored it completely by his unswerving love and benign grace. The perennial spring of spirituality gushed up, clear and strong, from the bosom of the infinite, and Narendranath held and preserved within the bounds of his heart the stream that had flown so long on the celestial heights of his Master's heart. Perhaps, with the transmission of Ramakrishna's spiritual power, on the eve of his passing away, into Narendranath, the two streams became completely merged into one majestic river that rushed out afterwards, overflowing the disciple's heart, to bathe in its healing waters the arid world, in order to cure it of its cultural myopia, fighting mania and deadly canker of disbelief.

HARNESSING THE STREAM

After the Advaita realization, when all his doubts were hushed for ever and he rose triumphantly above nature bursting through the bonds of primal ignorance, young Narendranath of twenty-three became eminently fit for comprehending, preserving, elucidating and living up to the spiritual message of the Master. We have already observed in a previous section how

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Ramakrishna commissioned Narendranath to look after the spiritual well-being of his brother-disciples, and how under his able and loving guidance the young disciples banded themselves together into an incipient brotherhood of potential monks while attending the sick-bed of their dear Master at the Cossipore villa.

Immediately after the Master had passed away, a tornado of renunciation and intense yearning for God-realization swept over their minds, wrenching them all, one group after another, from their family moorings. Tarak, Latu and Gopal (senior), who had already renounced their homes, continued to live in the Cossipore garden-house till the term of its lease expired. The other brothers of this band, with Narendranath at their head, came there every day to spend a considerable time in earnest spiritual exercise and contemplation on the life and teachings of their Master. The period of the lease expired in a month, when with extreme reluctance they had to leave the precincts of the house, sanctified and endeared by the holy association of their beloved Master and charged with the pathos of his separation.

A small, old and dilapidated house was rented forthwith at Barnagore, almost half-way between Cossipore and Dakshineswar, and the little group shifted there from the garden-house with the Master's relics and eventually ushered into existence a monastery for the Ramakrishna Order of monks. The expenses were met by some of the lay disciples of Ramakrishna, such as Suresh Chandra Mitra, Balaram Bose, Girish-

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chandra Ghose and Mahendranath Gupta. In the absence of the inspiring touch of their Master, these householder disciples felt very keenly the need of such a quiet and sacred retreat, where they might come at their leisure to refresh themselves in an absolutely pure atmosphere of unalloyed spirituality produced by the ardent devotion, renunciation and consecration of the younger group. Hence, very naturally, they were exceedingly interested in maintaining the simple and austere household of the young brotherhood.

By the end of the fatal year 1886, Narendranath together with most of the young visionaries went to spend a few days in the village home of Baburam on invitation from the latter's mother, who happened to be one of the very pious lady devotees of Ramakrishna. It was in the midst of the quiet and natural surroundings of this village that the young spiritual enthusiasts were fired with the ideals of absolute renunciation by the burning words of Narendranath and welded permanently into a brotherhood. One night, sitting before a blazing fire, they meditated for a long while and then listened with rapt attention to the inspired outpourings of Narendranath's heart. Their accredited chief painted on the canvas of their minds a glowing picture of the hallowed life of Jesus and inspired them to emulate the Prophet of Nazareth in holding aloft the ideals of renunciation and service. He made them realize that their beloved Master wanted them to strive very seriously with one-pointed devotion for their own spiritual illumination and to dedicate themselves

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absolutely to work for the salvation of mankind. They felt that this was precisely the mission of their life as desired by their Master, and that they were required to step out of their little grooves of home-life without delay to embrace God and His creation in one sweep, just as Christ had done nearly two thousand years ago. One by one the young disciples of Ramakrishna felt the urge of sacrificing everything for God and man, and proceeded to take the solemn vow of *sannyāsa*, that is, of absolute renunciation and consecration.

After they had come back from the village with a fresh and intensified ardour for renunciation, they severed themselves completely from their family ties, and in course of a couple of years all of them joined the Barnagore monastery. They stayed here till 1892, when they shifted to another house at Alambazar, a place immediately to the south of Dakshineswar. One auspicious day, the Barnagore monastery became sanctified by the traditional ceremony of *sannyāsa*, when all the inmates went through the rigid formalities according to the holy custom of the Śaṅkarite school of Hindu monks. Clad in ochre robes and loincloths and invested with new monastic names, they started a fresh career, supplementing, by such necessary forms and externals, the spirit of monasticism that they had imbibed from their Master and nourished so long with earnest devotion.

Seized by a frenzy of spiritual fervour, these young monks imposed upon themselves with passionate zeal the austere discipline of the recluse and devoted

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themselves entirely to the quest of spiritual truth as the only immediate and worthy object of their lives. Allowing themselves only spare food and meagre rest for their physical sustenance, they strove, constantly and seriously, to remain absorbed in spiritual exercise. Meditation, contemplation, hymns, prayers, religious songs and discourses came to be their only occupation, and they did not know how days and nights were swept away by the whirlwind of their devotion.

One of the brothers, Ramakrishnananda, kept the memory of the Master ablaze in the monastery by his supreme dedication to the service of Ramakrishna, the beloved Guru Mahārāj of the Order. He preserved all the relics of the Master in a separate room, placed a portrait of his on a pedestal and served it with the entire devotion of his heart, just as he had done when Ramakrishna had been alive. His scrupulous precision and regularity of service made everybody feel the living presence of the Master in the monastery. Like a model devotee of the *bhakti* cult, Ramakrishnananda stuck to this method of devotion to Guru Mahārāj as a Divine Incarnation almost up to the end of his life, and thus built up by his persevering zeal and devotional ardour a tradition that is being preserved by the monasteries that have been ushered into existence by the Order within a few decades after the passing away of the Master.

This new feature introduced by Ramakrishnananda lent a real charm to the monastery. Through this all disciples, lay and monastic, found something

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with which they could solace their hearts aggrieved by the separation from their dear Master. But it had its dangers as well. Unless proper safeguards were taken, this might develop into a mere cult and fix the brotherhood for ever within the narrow groove of a new sect. Vivekananda, the central figure of the brotherhood, was thoroughly alive to this danger, and he had the strength to steer clear of all kinds of sectarianism. By his deep love, affectionate care and wonderful breadth of outlook he commanded almost a reverential allegiance of the entire brotherhood to him. His magnetic personality attracted them all towards him, reminded them of the Master's eulogy of their leader, and made them eager to learn from him the import of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. He placed before them the lofty ideas and ideals that he had received from the Master and that appeared to his penetrating insight to be the essential and indispensable materials for building up the Ramakrishna Order of monks. He would call up before their imagination the vision of an entirely new type of monastic life characterized by a deep spiritual foundation combined with a broad, humanistic and universal religious outlook. He made them conscious of the fact that the Master's life was the very negation of sectarianism: it was in fact a living embodiment of all faiths. Ramakrishna really lived for the edification of the whole world; he rekindled all creeds and all religions by the flame of his distinct realizations. Vivekananda made them feel that worship of Ramakrishna should generate in their

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minds a respectful attitude towards all faiths, of which the Master's life was a blazing symbol. He cautioned his brothers against the culture of mere frothy sentimentalism in the name of religion and spurred them on to balance their spiritual emotions by pure reason and scriptural findings, as well as by sterling character. He would take pains to widen their cultural outlook by his illuminating discourses on modern science and philosophy, history and literature. He made them, moreover, alive to the fact that the Master had desired them to outstrip the limits of individualism and work for the spiritual uplift of humanity as much as for their own salvation. Thus Vivekananda charged all the brothers of the new Order of monks to become conscious of the tremendous responsibilities that had been laid imperceptibly on their shoulders by their beloved Master. In this way the sacred stream of spiritual ideas and ideals that had descended from the Olympic heights of Ramakrishna's life, flowed out of Vivekananda's heart and began to course gently through the entire brotherhood.

The spirit of renunciation that burnt constantly in the hearts of the monastic inmates would at times flare up more brightly than ever and make it impossible for them to stay even within the precincts of the monastery. Ramakrishnananda alone remained glued to the service of Guru Mahārāj, and would not stir out of the monastery. The rest of the brotherhood felt the occasional urge of breaking through the golden bond of union with their brothers and straying away to lead

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the severely lonely life of the wandering monk or that of the solitary recluse. Thus like migratory birds the monks would leave their little nest at Barnagore, go about the country for a while through different holy places of pilgrimage, and spend a considerable period of time in the solitude of suitable retreats on the heights of the Himalayas or on the banks of the Narmada or perhaps in the vicinity of some sacred city. At intervals they would fly back to the monastery to rest their tired wings for a while and gather strength for another sally.

Some of the brothers like Abhedananda, Yogananda and Adbhutananda had started the career of a *parivrājaka* or wandering monk immediately after the Master's departure. Vivekananda, who had from the very beginning been devoting himself entirely to rear up the brotherhood, was slow to move. He contented himself occasionally with short trips to Deoghar or Benares, his sole attention being fixed on the solidarity of the Order. But before long, even he felt the tremendous attraction for moving freely like a 'rolling river,' and he could no longer hold himself within the bounds of the monastery. Mountains and forests, river-banks and plateaus, temples and seats of scriptural learning, charged as they were with the spiritual association of countless saints and seers, sent out their appeal to him for the necessary *wanderjahre* of monastic life. The imperious call made him restless, and he had to lay aside for a time his burden of love

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for the brotherhood and break loose in 1888, a couple of years after the Master had passed away.

He passed through Benares, Ayodhya, Lucknow, Agra, Brindaban and the Himalayas. With his heart filled with ecstatic devotion to God, and yet remaining open to receive the aesthetic impress of monumental productions of art, he travelled with equal zeal through places of religious association as through those of historic interest. It was in the course of this journey that his galvanic personality made a complete stranger, a very pious and ardent soul, walk out of his home unceremoniously, follow him like a shadow through the remaining portion of his journey and become eventually his monastic disciple. Soon, however, both of them fell ill and had to come back to the Barnagore monastery.

In 1889 Vivekananda had to go over to Allahabad to nurse one of his brothers, Yogananda, who had been suffering from an attack of small-pox. During this short stay he made a profound impression on the Bengalee residents of the city by his pure and loving nature together with the depth and extensity of his knowledge. Here he heard about the great saint of Ghazipur, Pavhari Baba, whom he proceeded to meet early in the following year.

This saint impressed him very much, and for a time he felt tempted to receive from him lessons on Yoga, so that, contrary to his Master's wish, he might remain absorbed in *samādhi*. This desire, however, was not sanctioned by his mystic intuition. For

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several consecutive days he resolved to surrender himself to the saint as his disciple, but every night he had a vision of his beloved Master standing before him with a mute appeal in his look for dissuading him from his strange resolution. Intuition got the upper hand, and by its revelation the thin film of desire was shaken off the surface of his mind. The mystic scene of resurrection enthroned Ramakrishna for ever in his heart, and he pledged himself to remain a devoted servant of the glorious Master as also of the Holy Mother throughout eternity. He gave out his mind in a letter to one of his friends: "To no great one am I going again. . . . So now the great conclusion is that Ramakrishna has no peer; nowhere else in this world exists such unprecedented perfection, such wonderful kindness for all that does not stop to justify itself, such intense sympathy for man in bondage. . . . In times of great danger, great temptation, I have wept in extreme agony with the prayer, 'O God, save me,' and no response came; but this wonderful saint, or *avatāra,* or whatever you wish to call him, knew, through his power of insight into the human heart, of all my afflictions and removed them, in spite of myself, by bringing me to him." Suppressing his resurgent desire for remaining absorbed in *samādhi* through Yoga, Vivekananda followed the mysterious lead of the Master to work out the Divine Mother's will for the spiritual amelioration of mankind.

From Ghazipur he hurried to Benares to nurse his ailing brother Abhedananda. Here he overstayed his

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brother's recovery and spent some time in the garden of Pramadadas Mitra, practising severe austerities, till the sad news of the death of Balaram Bose, one of the devoted lay disciples of Ramakrishna, called him back to the Barnagore monastery. When Pramada Babu enquired how he, a staunch Vedāntist, whose clear vision saw through the ephemeral nature of relative existence, could be moved so much by bereavement, Vivekananda silenced the friend by his own formula of monastic life. "We are not dry monks," he said. "What! do you think that because a man is a *sannyāsin*, he has no heart?" Either the heart must stop dead in *nirvikalpa samādhi* or it must surge up with love for God and deified humanity. It must vibrate in sympathy with all aching hearts. The bereaved family needed consolation; so he had to rush out of his peaceful retreat in the Benares garden and reach Calcutta as quickly as possible.

He stayed in the Barnagore monastery for about a couple of months. He spent the days in sharing his thoughts and experiences with his brother monks as also with the lay disciples of Ramakrishna and other visitors of the monastery. The recluse in him, however, made him restless for finding a suitable retreat, away from the haunts of men, where he might devote himself uninterruptedly to a long course of meditation. During his recent travels he had witnessed people suffering from untold miseries due to lack of spirituality, and he became convinced that a necessary charge from a powerful dynamo of spirituality could alone rehabilitate

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the people. He sensed the existence of such a dynamo within himself and wanted seriously to unearth it and make it work. This idea possessed him, and he resolved to leave the monastery at once and never to return to it, unless he could develop his spiritual potentiality to such a degree as might enable him to transform a man by a mere touch. With this grim resolve he set out, with the blessings of the Holy Mother, in July, 1890, on an indefinitely long journey.

Akhandananda had already made an extensive tour in the northern parts of India including Kashmir, the Himalayas and even Tibet. Vivekananda took this brother with him as his companion and guide, and passed through Deoghar, Bhagalpore, Benares, Ayodhya and Nainital to Almora in the Himalayas. It was in the last named place that through a deep meditation under a banian tree he realized a momentous piece of spiritual truth, of which he made the following fragmentary note in his diary of that date: "The microcosm and the macrocosm are built on the same plan. Just as the individual soul is encased in the living body, so is the Universal Soul in the Living Prakṛiti (Nature)—the objective universe. Śivā (Kālī) is embracing Śiva; this is not a fancy. This covering of the one (Soul) by the other (Nature) is analogous to the relation between an idea and the word expressing it: they are one and the same, and it is only by a mental abstraction that one can distinguish them. Thought is impossible without words. Therefore, 'In the beginning was the Word,' etc. This dual aspect of

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the Universal Soul is eternal. So what we perceive or feel is this combination of the Eternally Formed and the Eternally Formless." Was this not Ramakrishna's perspective of the relative existence, and was this not the vision that determined all his dealings with men? Through the illumination at Almora Vivekananda perhaps realized the manifestation of Ramakrishna's spiritual power that had been transmitted to him shortly before his departure from the world. His Master's words about the identity of the *jiva* and Siva, which had appealed so long only to his intellect, now became living in the flash-light of his own intuition. He now had a clear grasp of the grand truth, Divinity of nature, which might enable him to reconcile his inward-bound mind with the injunction of his Master for serving humanity. This was, perhaps, why immediately after rising from his seat of meditation he told his companion Akhandananda, "Here, under this banian tree, one of the greatest problems of my life has been solved."

At Almora Vivekananda received the heart-rending news of his sister's suicide. He started forthwith up the mountains in search of a quiet place in the wilder region of the Himalayas. But soon his sudden illness as well as that of Akhandananda forced him to abandon his search for solitude and proceed to Srinagar, in Garhwal, and eventually to Dehra-Dun. Leaving his brother under the benign care of a chance acquaintance, Vivekananda moved on to Hrishikesh with Saradananda and Turiyananda, who had meanwhile

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joined him. Here he was again goaded by the congenial surroundings of the place to practise severe austerities. But within a few days he had a terrible attack of fever which brought him almost to the point of death. After recovery, his delicate health did not permit him to stay any longer in the extreme climate of the mountainous tract, and he was practically forced to retire to the plains. Thus his search for a suitable spot on the Himalayas, where he might devote himself to a long course of meditation, was brought to an abrupt end by a combination of fortuitous circumstances. He felt that something stood in the way of his retirement into solitude and pushed him towards the society of men. Akhandananda heard him saying times without number, "Whenever I intend to retire into the life of silence and austerity, I am compelled by the pressure of circumstances to give it up."

However, the party, joined by Brahmananda at Hardwar, proceeded to Saharanpur and thence to Meerut, where they met Akhandananda and stayed for nearly five months. Here the local librarian was astounded by the stupendous strength of Vivekananda's intellect, which enabled him to finish Sir John Lubbock's works in the course of a single day and even to answer all relevant questions regarding the contents of the books put to him by the surprised librarian.

Vivekananda's inner self, however, pressed on him the urgency of complete detachment even from the perfectly genial company of his brother monks. Some

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mighty forces were stirring within his breast, and these made him restless. His whole being yearned to equip itself for the great mission of his life and also to discover the exact path along which he was to proceed. About two years back, when one of his monastic disciples wanted to know what was worrying him, he had said, "My son, I have a great mission to fulfil and I am in despair at the smallness of my capacity. I have an injunction from my *guru* to carry out this mission. This is nothing less than the regeneration of my motherland. Spirituality has fallen to a low ebb and starvation stalks the land. India must become dynamic and effect the conquest of the world through her spirituality." His Master's injunction regarding the service of mankind as the mission of his life was constantly before his mind, and since his realization at Almora of the divine harmony in nature, nothing could possibly make any breach between the spiritual yearning of his soul and the service of deified humanity. The initial oscillations between the two poles were over. The two extremes of self-absorption and service drew near each other and went to form the two bounding surfaces of one continuous life of intense spirituality. Still his mind was not at rest. He had not yet discovered his precise line of action. Just as the harrowing sight of a famine had melted the heart of his Master and made him yearn for immediate redress, the continued misery of the people about him told powerfully upon his tender heart and made him almost mad for devising prompt measures of permanent relief. The

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sight was unbearable, and he must proceed straightway to prepare himself for immediate action. For this he required concentration of thoughts, a closer study of the condition of the people of the land, of which he had nearly covered the northern half by his travel, and a more intimate and extensive knowledge of the Hindu scriptures as also of modern thoughts. For all these he resolved to go to the southernmost extremity of India and visit the holy temple of Kanyā Kumārī and thus complete his cultural and economic survey of India from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. And during this contemplated journey he wanted to be severely alone, so that he might focus his entire attention on the problem before him that was pressing for an immediate solution. For fulfilling the noble mission of his life, for carrying out the injunction of his beloved Master, he could afford to forget for a time his spiritual brothers and ignore their demands on his love and solicitude. Accordingly, towards the end of January, 1891, he rent asunder the ties that bound him to his brother monks and slipped away without notice.

From Meerut he went to Delhi, and thence he proceeded, often on foot, through Rajputana, Kathiawar, Bombay, Mysore, Cochin, Malabar, Travancore and Madras, till by the end of 1892 he reached the holy temples of Rameswaram and Kanyā Kumārī at the extreme south of India. Stepping out of the golden cage of the Brotherhood, he roamed almost from end to end of the country with the freedom and majesty of an unfettered lion. Neither starvation nor imminent

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perils of life that he had to face on several occasions could ruffle the serene equanimity of his mind. He passed through deserts and forests without any companion, had a narrow escape from the inhuman clutches of revellers in religious orgies, came within an ace of death through starvation, met with scorn and rebuff from many a heartless stranger, and yet he marched undaunted, trampling upon the dangers that beset the path of the adventurous *parivrājaka*. Again, when he would be literally beleaguered by the cordiality of opulent hosts and the reverence of admiring visitors, nothing could switch his mind off his austere vows of renunciation. With his shaven head, ochre robes, wanderer's staff and begging bowl, the Swami accepted the hospitality of a depressed Pariah with as much grace and contentment as that of a feudatory chief, and with equal composure he would retrace his steps from an uncharitable door. In his poem 'The Song of the Sannyāsin,' composed about three years later, perhaps he gave a glimpse of his own mental equipoise by the following words:

"Heed then no more how body lives or goes,
Its task is done. Let Karma float it down;
Let one put garlands on, another kick
This frame; say naught. No praise or blame can be
Where praiser, praised, and blamer, blamed are one.
Thus be thou calm, Sannyāsin bold!
Say—*Om tat sat, Om.*"

He was verily the antithesis of weakness. As a free soul, a mighty conqueror of nature and a spiritual

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teacher of mankind, he always held his head high and would never bend his knees before anybody on earth. Even before Their Highnesses he was very unconventional in his manners and ruthless in his criticism of their ways of life. No prejudice, no tradition, no consideration of caste or communal barriers could restrict the intrepid movements of this unleashed lion. Neither orthodoxy nor rank Westernism could hold him within its bounds; untrammelled absolutely by any fetish of customs or wild thought, he discovered his own path with his own light of spiritual realization and penetrating reason. Even regarding the scriptural statements he had his own views, and he refused to depend solely on the writings of the great commentators. Yet by his outstanding personality he carried all before him. He impressed people by his genuine love and sympathy for all, his purity and firmness of character, his serene and peaceful composure, and above all by his radiating spirituality. Though his exterior might at times wear the stern and destructive appearance of a thunderbolt, the structure beneath the surface always remained as soft and attractive as a beautiful flower. His bold and careless movements born of the absolute freedom of his soul might for a moment be mistaken for an unworthy air of *hauteur*, but a closer view would reveal a perpetual undercurrent of all-encompassing love and unimpeachable humility. His heart was filled to the brim with spiritual fervour and the milk of human kindness. It was this heart that combined with his vigorous intellect to edify and

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leave a lifelong impress on many a blessed soul, including even men of the highest rank of India like the Maharajas of Mysore and Alwar.

Besides his all-consuming love for God and deified humanity, his heart was swayed by a devouring passion for a ceaseless extension of knowledge. The dividing line between secular and spiritual knowledge had vanished for ever from his sight. Every branch of knowledge was related to man, who was no other than God. Man was composed of different sheaths—physical, intellectual and spiritual; the different compartments of knowledge referred ultimately to one or other of these sheaths superimposed on the God-in-man. Through politics and economics, sociology and ethnology, psychology and biology, history and biography, through material science and rational philosophy, authors might present sectional views of man, but he was out to co-ordinate all these and fit these in with the Vedāntic dictum of the essential Divinity of man and hold before the world a comprehensive, accurate and synthetic picture of the puzzling complex known as the human individual. This was why one would find him poring over a French novel with as much devotion as over a book on Hindu philosophy. At Khetri, in Rajputana, he studied for a time under a celebrated Sanskrit grammarian, while at Ahmedabad he devoted himself to books on Jaina and Moslem culture; at Porebandar, in Kathiawar, he spent nearly nine months in mastering the Hindu scriptures, while

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at Alwar he brooded on the need of a school of Indian historians inspired by the Western spirit of scientific exactitude.

However, he did not shut himself up entirely within the cover-pages of books. He sought knowledge as much from the living men around him as from books. And his open and receptive mind would not hesitate to take its lessons even from the humblest of men. From unlettered hillmen on the heights of the Himalayas he had learnt how they could justify their preposterous practice of polyandry on the ostensible grounds of selflessness involved in the common proprietorship of a wife. In the desert plains of Rajputana under the roof of a feudatory chief, he received, to his utter bewilderment, an eye-opening lesson on samesightedness from the emotional song of a common dancing girl. Such stray lessons from individuals went to melt whatever was stiff and crystallized in his thoughts in the form of prejudice, and made him feel the throb of the saint even beneath the breast of the worst of sinners. The Divinity in man, which he had heard of from his Master and which he had already perceived through the spiritual intuition of his pure heart, now appeared as clear as daylight even through the dealings of the savage and the reprobate.

Besides, he drew no less valuable lessons from his firsthand readings of the social, economic and cultural life of the people. Men belonging to different castes, sects and communities, with different shades of

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provincialism in their widely varying thoughts and ways of life, proved to be a highly engrossing subject of his study. By the time he reached the end of his journey in the South, he had scanned thoroughly with his searching eyes the entire cultural structure of Hindu India, and realized how myriads of kaleidoscopic patterns of social life scattered all over the country were all ultimately based on the same spiritual foundation laid by the seers of old, the *ṛishis* of ancient India. Thus his direct experience opened his eyes to the fact that a central unity could accommodate thousands of varieties on the surface—that unity in variety was a law which held good not only so far as religious creeds were concerned, as demonstrated by his Master's realizations, but also operated behind the entire panorama of nature and governed even the social customs of man.

But he was not merely a dispassionate student of sociology, a dilettante gleaner of facts and figures, an indifferent scientist working at social theories and hypotheses, nor, certainly, an unconcerned tourist-spectator. While his intellect busied itself in storing up facts and probing them, his heart smarted under a terrible sympathetic pain for suffering humanity on all sides through whatever place he passed. His direct experience of the appalling misery of the downtrodden masses, the helpless victims of a dreadful system of social iniquity, set his whole being on fire. Day after day, and month after month, he passed through his poor and benighted motherland, often without rest and

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without sleep, racking his brains all the while to determine how he might give the necessary lift to the distressed and degraded masses. With such a conflagration in his volcanic heart, he reached the southernmost limit of India, paid his homage to the goddess Kanyā Kumārī at Cape Comorin, and swam across to a neighbouring rock cut off entirely from the mainland. Seated in the absolute solitude of the rock and surrounded by the dashing waves of the ocean all about him, he looked at the mainland and visualized the whole of India before him—India filled with the agonies of millions of human hearts. A spasm of intense love, boundless sympathy and infinite despair squeezed his mighty mind into a spell of utter silence, and in the midst of that breathless silence, spiritual intuition flooded his heart with light, in which he saw clearly and unmistakably the path that he was to tread. The real self of India stood revealed before his eyes. The potency of her age-old culture as also the immediate causes of her present degradation became plain to him. The nation appeared to be a sleeping leviathan, and all that it required to stand on its feet was a spiritual awakening. And it became equally clear to him how he was to rouse it from its disgraceful lethargy. Rising from his seat, with a fullness of heart he left hurriedly the blessed spot, which he had found after years of painful and abortive search. He proceeded, through Ramnad and Pondicherry, to the capital of the nearest presidency, Madras, in order to launch forthwith his plan of action.

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Here he drew round him a band of selfless and enthusiastic young men and fired them with the ideal of dedicating themselves entirely to the service of the motherland. These ardent disciples took up the noble cause with unstinted devotion, worked under the direction of the Swami, and remained faithful to him up to the end of their lives. In this great city of the South, teeming with intellectual and energetic people, the Swami announced his resolution of carrying a mission to the West.

About four months back, he had heard of the Parliament of Religions to be held in 1893 at Chicago, U.S.A., in connection with the World's Fair. It was before this august assembly of the chosen representatives of different religions that he desired to unburden his soul. He was firm in his conviction that if the Hindus were to rise to the heights of glory, it was absolutely necessary that the faith of the ancient *rishis* should be made dynamic, Hinduism should become aggressive. He thought that he was duty-bound to place before the world the spiritual treasures of Hindu India, which had been lying hidden in caves and forests, temples and religious seminaries since the heyday of Buddhist and Hindu evangelism. The invidious exclusiveness of the Hindus, giving rise to such words as 'Mlechchha' and 'Yavana' echoing the sense of the Christian's 'Heathen' and the Muslim's 'Kafir,' belied the essential catholicism of the original Hindu scriptures. Their fanatic zeal in walling up their creed, lest it should be defiled by a

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foreigner's breath, appeared to him to be a 'Himalayan blunder,' arising out of a monstrous perversion of the universal teachings of the Upanishadic seers. And he believed that it was this reprehensible Hindu idea of untouchability, victimizing by vanity and hatred other races and communities as much as the different strata of its own society, that, like an original sin, had brought upon the head of this nation the burden of its untold miseries. He, therefore, resolved to expiate a part of this sin by overriding the traditional barrier and carrying the message of Hindu India across the seas. He was, moreover, convinced that a free and honourable exchange of ideas and ideals between the East and the West was a desideratum of the age. It would certainly go to benefit both the hemispheres. Dissemination of the spiritual ideas and ideals of India among the advanced nations of the West would surely raise this land in the esteem of the outer world, and also quicken the peoples of the earth with new life and new visions. He felt that the time was ripe for the world to hear and ponder over his Master's message of Universal Religion, for this, he believed, would go a long way to lift humanity above the morass of heretical doubts and sectarian dissensions. A favourable response from the West would, moreover, stir up the self-consciousness of the Hindus, who were wavering between paralysing bigotry and frantic imitation of the Occidental nations. This would break both the spell of torpor of the conservative masses and the spell of cultural hypnotism of the

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modern intelligentsia, and inspire both the wings to work for a complete rejuvenation of the land. His path, therefore, for reviving India and ushering in an epoch of Hindu renaissance coincided thoroughly with the path along which he was to proceed to help entire humanity out of its present welter of cultural ideals. And this path led him towards the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, which appeared to him to be the fittest forum, decreed by Providence, for introducing to the world the hoary ideals of the Hindu *ṛishis*.

Vivekananda's towering personality, vast and varied range of knowledge, great command over English and Sanskrit, unusual powers of repartee, sparkling wit, above all, his patriotic fervour and beaming spirituality, made a deep and lasting impression in Madras and Hyderabad. People of all ranks flocked to hear his illuminating discourses and volunteered to help him through his mission in the West. His young and enthusiastic disciples went about the cities and collected the necessary money for his journey. Meanwhile, the Swami was glad to receive a favourable hint from his intuition, which convinced him of Divine sanction of his contemplated line of action. He also sought for and obtained, through correspondence, benediction of the Holy Mother before he finally decided to sail for America. Instead of sailing from Madras as arranged, he had, however, to go up to Rajputana on an urgent call from the Maharaja of Khetri and thence to proceed to Bombay to take the boat for America.

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En route to Bombay he met two of his brother-disciples, Brahmananda and Turiyananda, at the Abu Road station, where he halted for a few days. The Swami's attitude and talks revealed to his brothers the tumultuous emotions that were about to break through the walls of Vivekananda's heart and sweep over the earth in a torrential rush. Addressing Turiyananda he said, "Hari Bhāi, I cannot understand your so-called religion! But my heart has grown very much, and I have learnt to feel (for others). Believe me, I feel it very keenly!" These were not empty words. They proceeded from the depths of his heart. As he uttered these words, there was a profound expression of sadness and intense emotion through his entire being. After releasing a fragment of his deep-seated feelings for suffering humanity through these few words, he sat silent for a while and tears streamed down his cheeks. The brother whom he had addressed said long afterwards to a group of interested listeners, "You can imagine what went through my spirit when I heard these pathetic words and saw the majestic sadness of Swamiji. 'Are these not,' I thought, 'the very words and feelings of the Buddha?' And I remembered that long ago, when he had gone to Bodh-Gaya to meditate under the Bodhi tree, he had had a vision of the Lord Buddha, who entered into his body. . . . I could clearly see that the whole suffering of humanity had penetrated his palpitating heart. Nobody could understand Vivekananda unless he saw at least a fraction of the volcanic feelings which were

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in him. . . . It was his rending sympathy which made him often shed tears of burning blood. . . . Do you think that these tears of blood were shed in vain? No! Each one of these tears, shed for his country, every inflamed whisper of his mighty heart, will give birth to troops of heroes, who will shake the world with their thoughts and their deeds."

TORRENTIAL RUSH

With an unbearable agony in his heart for the appalling misery of his dear motherland, and impelled by an inner urge to work for her salvation through a healthy and honourable cultural contact with the outer world, Vivekananda rushed out of India, alone and unfriended, relying absolutely on the Divine Will. The extremely exclusive and walled-up life of the Hindus, originating probably in the middle ages as a safeguard against Moslem aggression, had not been accustomed to sea-voyage for centuries. Their social laws would not permit them to stir out of their land. Delinquents were punished with social ostracism or even excommunication. The prohibition had obviously outlived its purpose and remained to clog the wheels of progress in the modern days of easy communication and exchange of thoughts and ideals between different countries. It is significant that Vivekananda had to overstep this social barrier right at the start on his chosen path of action. He had also to suppress even the instinctive craving of a Hindu monk for seclusion and for holy places of pilgrimage. Was not the

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entire world a sacred manifestation of the Divine? Was not man behind all shades of complexion equally holy as an expression of the Lord? With such a universal and deified outlook, and defying the anachronistic and meaningless restrictions of the Hindu society, he left the shores of Bombay on the 31st of May, 1893.

He proceeded to America along the Pacific route. What little he had occasion to see of China and Japan convinced him of the existence in both the countries of an undercurrent of spiritual thoughts that had flowed out of India in days long gone by. This made him visualize the glorious days of ancient India. But the present wretchedness of his motherland stood out in bold relief against the prosperous scene of modern Japan, and this lacerated his aching heart. With reverential regard for the past, intense sympathy for the present and a vague and intuitive hope for the future of India, he crossed over to America.

He landed in Vancouver and thence proceeded straight to Chicago by train. The World's Fair burst before his eyes like a dazzling epitome of Western civilization. A very high standard of neatness, precision and organized skill, miracles wrought by machines, amazing harmony between utility and aesthetics, splendid display of riches and articles of luxury—all these combined to present before his wondering eyes a spectacular show of the New World at the height of its glory. Men and women in immaculate costumes and with polished manners filled the

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enclosure on all sides. His imaginary picture of the West faded before the magnificent panorama of Western life. He felt, admired and stood stupefied before the glorious grandeur of Occidental culture and bowed his head before the persevering zeal of the nations that had worked for centuries to evolve it.

The painful contrast of this picture with that of his motherland filled with poverty and squalor pierced his tender heart. With a gaping and hidden wound in his heart, he roamed about in the Fair and made necessary enquiries about the Parliament of Religions. He was surprised to hear that none but duly authorized delegates could think of addressing the august assembly, and he was utterly dismayed to learn that the time for enrolling new delegates had already expired. His impetuous soul had rushed him out of India without caring even to equip him with necessary information. The simple child of spiritual India, trusting in nothing but the Divine Will, knocked at the gates of the thoroughly organized Parliament of Religions and found that it was not to be opened to one who had no charter from any recognized Society. Cold waves of depression benumbed the disillusioned monk. However, he pulled himself up quickly, gave up the idea of speaking in the Parliament and turned his mind to see as much of the country as he could afford to do.

Victimized by sharks almost at every step of his journey, he had come to the end of his resources. Moreover, he had not provided himself adequately

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against the severities of the approaching winter. He cabled for help to his Madras disciples and also applied for a grant to an organized Society. Unfortunately the head of the Society communicated his uncharitable wish by the cryptic message, "Let the devil die of cold!" He, however, remained unruffled, resigning himself completely to Divine dispensation and wrote to a disciple, "I am here amongst the children of the Son of Mary, and the Lord Jesus will help me." Hearing that living was comparatively cheap in Boston, he started immediately for that city. In the railway train, luckily, he met an American lady, who with overwhelming sympathy invited him to her house in Boston and introduced him later to Professor Wright of the Harvard University. The professor was so much impressed by the Swami's talks that he told him plainly that if he required any credentials for the right of addressing the Parliament of Religions, then surely the sun must require credentials for the right of shining. Dr. Wright furnished the Swami forthwith with a very strong letter of introduction to one of his friends, who happened to be the chairman of the committee for selecting delegates to the Parliament. The tone of the letter can be felt through the following sentence, "Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together." Armed with this letter and encouraged by a reviving hope, the Swami went back to Chicago. He arrived late at the station and did not know where to go, and as a matter of fact, he had to spend the night in an empty box on

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the station premises, as he had lost the address of the committee. Next morning he went about the city in search of his destination. After a weary and fruitless endeavour, he sat down exhausted in the street, when a generous lady from the opposite house stepped out, almost like a godsend, and proceeded to help him out of his difficulty. With her help he got himself enrolled without delay as a delegate to the Parliament of Religions and lodged with the other Oriental delegates.

Thus, fleeced by swindlers all along his route, stranded amidst people rolling in wealth and luxury and knocked out by the rigid rules of the Parliament, the Swami at long last was rolled back by a combination of propitious circumstances to the very place and position for which he had come all the way from India. Through the initial rude shocks followed by pleasant surprises, however, he felt the touch of the Divine hand that appeared to be leading him surely and steadily towards a great goal.

The Parliament of Religions commenced its first session on the 11th of September. The Swami's majestic appearance expressive of a virile manhood, combined with his strikingly attractive apparel, made him conspicuous among the Oriental delegates. He waited till the end of the day to take the last turn of making a short speech by way of announcing himself before the great assembly. As he rose to speak, admiring and curious eyes were fixed upon the stately figure of the Swami, with black hair, large and lustrous eyes, red lips and olive complexion set off by a big

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yellow turban, and flowing ochre robe, drawn in at the waist by an orange cord. He opened his lips to accost the audience endearingly as "Sisters and brothers of America," and he was overwhelmed by deafening cheers from all corners of the hall. Silence followed, and Vivekananda poured out his heart. Bereft of cold formalities, rigid dogmas, and hollow, stilted or illusive phraseology, his artless and spontaneous speech proceeded from the fullness of his heart and verily 'he spake like one in authority.' The surging stream of spirituality, of endless love for God and deified humanity, of universal faith in all religions—the stream that had had its birth on the snow-capped heights of the heavenly life of Ramakrishna and had descended to the immaculate heart of his chosen disciple, suddenly broke through all barriers and gushed out in a torrential rush of apostolic love and wisdom. The house was flooded by waves of spirituality. The enraptured audience, listening to the age-old message of unbounded catholicism of the Hindu seers, saw new light beyond the misty hedges of sects, communities, churches and denominations. Many eyes were opened, many souls were stirred, and the speaker was greeted with a fitting and unique ovation.

Until the final session of the Parliament on the 27th September, he delivered ten or twelve speeches, through which he acquainted the house with the lofty ideas and ideals connected with various aspects of Hinduism, and also with his central theme of Universal Religion based on the findings of the Vedic seers. In

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the inspired utterance with which he concluded his address at the final session, one sees a revelation of the spirit of Ramakrishna, and gets the key-note of Vivekananda's message to the West. He declared with all the emphasis that he could command: "The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to the law of growth. . . . If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of his resistance: 'Help and not Fight,' 'Assimilation and not Destruction,' 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.'"

Whatever might have been the object of convening the Parliament, surely, none of the organizers could expect that a person emerging out of the depths of Asiatic heathenism would galvanize the audience in such a way by a more liberal, accommodating and rational view of religion than any of the erudite sponsors of sectarian churches present in the assembly could ever dream of. It was really Vivekananda who

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breathed a spirit of universalism into the Parliament and immortalized it as a monumental endeavour for tolerance, peace and amity among the religions of the world. He raised the Parliament from a mere symposium of diverse and divergent views about religion to the dignity of a magnificent forum through which the world was enlightened on the glorious concept of Universal Religion. It was indeed his own contribution that enabled him to compliment the land of the Parliament of Religions with the following words: "Asoka's council was a council of the Buddhist faith. Akbar's, though more to the purpose, was only a parlour-meeting. It was reserved for America to proclaim to all quarters of the globe that the Lord is in every religion."

His clear and impressive exposition, combined with his all-embracing love and prophetic vision, elicited from the American press a chorus of admiring and reverential applause. *The New York Herald* frankly announced him as "undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions," and added: "After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation." *The Boston Evening Transcript* said by way of depicting the magnetic influence of the Swami: "He is a great favourite at the Parliament from the grandeur of his sentiments and his appearance as well. If he merely crosses the platform he is applauded; . . . At the Parliament of Religions they used to keep Vivekananda until the end of the programme, to make people stay till the end of

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the session. . . . The four thousand fanning people in the Hall of Columbus would sit smiling and expectant, waiting for an hour or two of other men's speeches, to listen to Vivekananda for fifteen minutes." Thus by the unqualified eulogy of a host of journals the Hindu monk was advertised through the length and breadth of America.

The unauthorized and unrecognized intruder in the Parliament of Religions, the nondescript stranger in a peculiar garb and with an almost empty purse, the innocent target of mob curiosity and the object of sympathy of a few generous souls blazed forth suddenly like a meteor before the American society, which rushed to lionize him in all possible ways. The doors of the rich, the learned, the religiously disposed were flung open to him, and he was overwhelmed by the reverential courtesy and luxurious hospitality of his admiring hosts. The Hindu monk with his bleeding heart for his poor motherland did, however, survive the shock of recognition and honour. He worked hard for his noble mission and spent every ounce of his energy in enlightening the citizens of the great republic on India, her glorious hoary culture and her present state of harrowing misery. His days were spent in talks and discourses in parlours and public places, and in keeping hundreds of engagements with interested people who would flock to him from different quarters.

For a time he placed himself under a lecture bureau and toured through a number of important cities including Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Boston,

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Washington and New York. At Boston he courted the displeasure of the audience by his scathing criticism of certain aspects of Western life. He had analysed Western civilization, assessed both its bright and dark sides and had been considerably frank, bold and enthusiastic in placing before all the findings of his investigations. While writing to Indian friends and disciples, he would pay glowing tributes to the American's love of liberty, economic policy, industrial organization, educational system, devotion to progress of science, museums and art-galleries and thoroughly organized social welfare work on scientific lines. Again, while addressing the American public, he would vehemently denounce the shady aspects of Occidental society, characterized by national vanity and selfishness, breathless race for luxury, religious and cultural intolerance, economic exploitation of the weak, political intrigues and violence. He was pre-eminently a teacher of mankind, and as such he could hardly afford to humour his audience at the cost of truth. Spiritual teachers of mankind cannot placate people for cheap popularity; rather they face opposition, inquisition and even crucifixion, for trying sincerely to correct the ways of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Perversity bred of ignorance and plethoric egotism, is engrained in the nature of the unspiritual man, and spiritual Masters have to pay heavily for it. Vivekananda's plain-speaking, too, instead of being an eye-opener, wounded the national vanity of his Boston audience, irritated for a while the press and gave a handle to

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jealous partisans bent upon mischief. The Swami, however, remained unperturbed, paid no heed to the reactionary wave of indignation and looked with compassion upon the agents of mischief.

At Detroit he broke away from the lecture bureau and proceeded independently on his lecturing tour through a number of cities. Ultimately he settled in New York with a band of earnest souls around him, and held with them regular classes on Jñāna-Yoga and Rāja-Yoga, that is, a system of Hindu metaphysics and Hindu science of practical religion. Of the devoted American followers who remained faithful to him up to the end of their lives, mention may be made of the following: Miss Greenstidel (afterwards Sister Christine), Miss S. E. Waldo (afterwards Sister Haridasi), Mr. and Mrs. Francis Leggett and Mrs. Ole Bull. Miss Josephine MacLeod, who is still alive, also belongs to this group. There were some other enthusiasts who had to be rejected by him after a while for their inordinate craving for occult powers. However, in New York, his first course lasted from February to June, 1895, and about this time he had finished dictating to Miss S. E. Waldo his illuminating treatise on Rāja-Yoga, which was valued as much by scholars like the American philosopher William James as by spiritual aspirants like Count Leo Tolstoy of Russia.

In the summer of 1895 the Swami retired with nearly twelve devoted disciples to a quiet hill-retreat, the Thousand Island Park, on the bank of the river St. Lawrence. It was here that he converted his philo-

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sophical seminar into a full-fledged hermitage and initiated his disciples into the discipline of *āśrama* life by way of a temporary experiment. The Swami applied himself exclusively to watch and help the spiritual growth of each of the individuals and to instil into them all the fundamental ideas and ideals of religious life. Each day the Swami's "Inspired Talks" opened a new vista of noble thoughts and sentiments, and his closer spiritual contact went to chasten and exalt the lives of the earnest group of spiritual aspirants. It was here that he released before his disciples his thoughts and sentiments about his Master, Ramakrishna.

In September, 1895, he went over to England, *via* Paris, for a change on grounds of health, but instead of taking rest, he worked hard for his mission. About this time he had the satisfaction of writing to a Madras disciple: "In England my work is really splendid." The English people, he observed, were slow to receive new ideas, but once they grasped anything they had the tenacity of clinging to it for life. Moreover, he felt that the British nation with its far-flung empire was a fit medium through which he might broadcast his ideas all over the world. During his short stay in England, the Swami's magnetic personality and illuminating discourses made a great impression upon many, and won the esteem even of learned and aristocratic circles; and the English press went so far as to honour him as a spiritual teacher of the order of Buddha and Christ.

Towards the end of 1895 he returned to America

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for a brief sojourn of about three months. Besides conducting his regular classes in New York, he went through a whirlwind course of lectures before learned audiences like the Metaphysical Society of Hartford, the Ethical Society of Brooklyn and the Philosophical Seminar of Harvard, as well as before the general public in various places in New York, Boston and Detroit. About this time a young Englishman, J. J. Goodwin, dedicated his life entirely to the Swami's service. It was the devoted application of this idealistic stenographer that went to preserve the later lectures of Vivekananda. In February, 1896, the Swami introduced Ramakrishna to the New York public through his brilliant discourse on "My Master." The most important business of the Swami during this period was the consolidation of his American work by organizing the Vedānta Society of New York under Francis Leggett as its President.

Thus placing his mission in America on a permanent footing and writing to one of his brother-disciples, Saradananda, to come and take charge of the New York centre, he left for London by the middle of April, 1896. Saradananda, who had already arrived in London, took necessary instruction from the Swami and proceeded to New York by the end of June. The Swami again applied himself vigorously to do some solid work in England through public lectures as well as through regular classes on Vedānta philosophy. This time he became intimate with the old and venerable Indologist of Oxford, Max Müller, and attracted

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a band of staunch followers like Miss Margaret E. Noble (later Sister Nivedita), Mr. and Mrs. Sevier and Miss Henrietta Müller. With the Seviers he spent about a couple of months on the Continent. The Swami stayed for a while in the bracing climate of Switzerland in order to refresh his tired nerves, went to Germany to meet, on invitation, Paul Deussen, the great Vedāntic philosopher of Europe, and then returned to England, visiting Holland on the way. The sublime Alpine scenery of Switzerland suggested to the Swami the idea of establishing on the heights of the Himalayas a monastery where his Eastern and Western disciples might find a suitable place for union. The Seviers took up the idea and made it their life-work to give it a practical shape. By the end of December, 1896, the Swami left the shores of England, made a short stay in Italy and then proceeded to India. The Seviers accompanied him to spend the rest of their lives in India devoting themselves exclusively to spiritual practice as well as to work out the Swami's idea about the Himalayan monastery.

REVITALIZING THE RELIGIONS

Thus Vivekananda spent more than three years of the best part of his life in America and Europe and exhausted himself physically by his Herculean endeavour at broadcasting the spiritual message of his Master and gleaning at the same time whatever the Western civilization might contribute towards the rehabilitation of his dear motherland. Besides familiar-

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izing thousands of Westerners with the precious contents of Hinduism and thus indirectly raising India in their esteem, the Swami convinced them of the necessity of the essentials of religion, held up before them the rationale behind all faiths and made them alive to the paramount need of transcending sect-bound thoughts for realizing the glorious ideal of Universal Religion.

He acquainted his Western audience with the Faith of the Hindus rooted in the oldest of scriptures, the Vedas; he told them about the impersonal character of its teachings, its universal message of unbounded catholicism, its presentation of various readings of Divinity, monistic, qualified monistic and dualistic, and also about various kinds of religious practice grouped under four fundamental types, namely, Jñāna-Yoga, Rāja-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga and Karma-Yoga, covering the entire range of human tastes, temperaments and capacities. He explained to them the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth and enlightened them on the Hindu idea of salvation through the realization of one's identity with the Absolute. Then by his rational exposition he showed how the Hindu view of religion could stand the severest scrutiny of reason and exist in perfect amity with the findings of science. Above all, he laid special emphasis on the fact that the broad and liberal message of Vedānta contained the science of all religions that might enable the world to realize the essential unity underlying them all and to stand united on the magnificent pedestal of Universal

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Religion. He made them aware of the fact that Hinduism possessed the golden bond that might unite all the different churches of the world without dwarfing or mutilating the individuality of any. He showed how the findings of the Upanishadic seers regarding the fundamental verities of life and existence were perfectly non-denominational in their character, and these could be assimilated by all sections of humanity in order to secure their faith in their respective creeds against the aggressions of critical reason and also to liberalize their outlook on all other religions. Ramakrishna, through his vast and deep realizations, had discovered this fact long ago, and it was the Master's supreme discovery that was announced to the world by the trumpet voice of his illustrious apostle. The Swami was firm in his conviction that resuscitation of the lofty and catholic message of the Upanishads would bring about Hindu renaissance and concomitantly place all the religions of the earth on a sound basis and tie them up in a bond of fellowship. Thus Hindu renaissance, according to the Swami, would herald the advent of Universal Religion.

The Swami derived from the Hindu scriptures, illumined by his Master's and his own realizations, a highly rational view of religion suited admirably to the intellectual demands of the modern age. By his presentation the West learnt to look at religion from an altogether new angle. The Swami's definition of religion as "the manifestation of the Divinity that is already in man" went surely to clear a mass of pre-

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judice against religion. According to him, religion is a growth from within till one reaches the last stage of human evolution, when the individual realizes within his own self all his dreams of perfection and absolute freedom, and discovers the kingdom of heaven that has been lying all the time within the heart. Since evolution presupposes involution, the evolving man must have within himself the potentiality of perfection, which he is trying to manifest consciously or unconsciously through all his thoughts and endeavours. When man conquers his inner nature, he becomes perfect, "even as the Father in heaven is perfect," and finds God, the ever-free Master of nature, the living ideal of perfection and absolute freedom, as the essence of his own being. When one attains such a state, he is said to be religious. Hence did the Swami say, "Religion is neither in books, nor in intellectual consent, nor in reason. Reason, theories, documents, doctrines, books, religious ceremonies are all helps to religion; religion itself consists in realization." Thus, instead of laying stress merely on authority, tradition and dogmas, instead of clouding the issue with supernaturalism, instead of making any peremptory demand on the credulity of people regarding things and ideas unwarranted by scientific knowledge and positivistic common sense, the Swami presented religion as a perfectly 'natural and normal element of human life.' Such a rational concept of religion accords completely with modern thoughts voiced so clearly by John Haynes Holmes of Chicago through the statement: "Religion

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is a natural and normal element of human life. It is not supernatural in any sense of revelation. It is not a superstition in any sense of fraud or fiction. It is simply the experience of human nature in the higher ranges of its activities."

The Swami further pointed out that religion is not only a natural and normal element, but also a universal phenomenon of human life. He observed that the craving for perfection, for infinite life, bliss and knowledge is a deep-rooted instinct of man. Man is impelled by his very nature to strive ceaselessly for freedom from all forms of bondage; his inner nature does not permit him to remain permanently blind to the vanity of the world, and as soon as he visualizes the unreality of material nature, he is urged from within to find an everlasting rock of existence for his own security and relief. When bereavement of any ephemeral content of the world shocks him, he craves for something substantial with which he may remain in eternal union of love. The world may, at the worst, delude a person for a whole lifetime by appearing to be real and attractive, and may absorb his entire attention and energy, but "even to him death comes, and he is also compelled to ask, 'Is this real?' Religion begins with this question and ends with its answer." The universal search for the real, the permanent, the perfect and the ever-free ideal, which is none other than God, is prompted by the religious urge of man's inner nature. This was why the Swami announced, "It is my belief that religious thought is in man's very

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constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can give up thought and life." Thus through the Swami's conception of religion as a natural and universal phenomenon of human life, the Western world found a perfectly humanistic view of religion that fitted in wonderfully with its intellectual predilections. Havelock Ellis appears almost to echo the Swami's ideas when he describes religion as "a spiritual function which is almost a physiological function."

Besides being a natural, normal and universal function, religion was declared by the Swami to be the source of the highest kind of happiness. Said the Swami: "The lower the organization, the greater the pleasure in the senses. Very few men can eat a meal with the same gusto as a dog, or a wolf. But all the pleasures of the dog or the wolf have gone, as it were, into the senses. The lower types of humanity in all nations find pleasure in the senses, while the cultured and the educated find it in thought, philosophy, in the arts and the sciences. Spirituality is a still higher plane. The subject being infinite, that plane is the highest, and the pleasure there is the highest for those who can appreciate it. So, even on the utilitarian ground that man is to seek for pleasure, he should cultivate religious thought, for it is the highest pleasure that exists." Yet the Swami was not a believer in the valuation of religion on the grounds of utility; he taught that religion as a laudable quest for eternal truth was its own reward, and he challenged the utilitarian

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assessor saying: "What right has a person to ask that truth should be judged by the standard of utility or money? Suppose there is no utility, will it be less true? Utility is not the test of truth." Still, to satisfy the seekers of pounds, shillings and pence in everything, the Swami showed how religious practice, that is, systematic striving for perfection, brings unbounded joy.

The Swami did, moreover, point out that "religion as a science, as a study, is the greatest and the healthiest exercise that the human mind can have. This pursuit of the Infinite, this struggle to grasp the Infinite, this effort to get beyond the limitations of the senses, out of matter, as it were, and to evolve the spiritual man, this striving day and night to make the Infinite one with our being—this struggle itself is the soundest and the most glorious that man can make." He went farther to declare that it was not only the individual, but the entire society in its collective existence that was benefited by religion, because religion appeared to be the most potent and salutary force for sustaining the very life of a social group. The Swami declared emphatically: "Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destinies of the human race, none certainly is more potent than that the manifestation of which we call religion. All social organizations have as a background the workings of that peculiar force, and the greatest cohesive impulse ever brought into play among human units has been derived from this power. . . . It is the greatest motive

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power that moves the human mind. No other ideal can put into us the same mass of energy as the spiritual. So far as human history goes, it is obvious to all of us that this has been the case, and that its powers are not dead. I do not deny that men, on simply utilitarian grounds, can be very good and moral. . . . But the world-movers, men who bring, as it were, a mass of magnetism into the world, whose spirit works in hundreds and in thousands, whose life ignites others with a spiritual fire, such men, we always find, have that spiritual background. Their motive power comes from religion. Religion is the greatest motive power for realizing that infinite energy which is the birthright and nature of every man. In building up character, in making for everything that is good and great, in bringing peace to others, and peace to one's own self, religion is the highest motive power, and therefore ought to be studied from that standpoint." The recently departed Rev. J. T. Sunderland implicitly confirmed the Swami's views by depicting the reverse side: "If the world on a large scale ever comes to believe that man, instead of possessing a spiritual and divine nature, related to the Infinite Mind, and in some deep true sense a child of God, is only an accidental thing, an exceptionally intelligent brute, what will be the consequences? Can the startling fact of humanity dropping down to such a lowered estimate of itself fail to be followed by very serious consequences? For one thing, will not all human advancement, social, educational, moral, and religious, be seriously checked?

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Will not men tend to lose interest in progress; tend to lose interest in all high things; tend to grow less earnest and less moral in character; tend more and more to say, 'Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die'?"

So much convinced was the Swami about the essential necessity of religion for the collective security and happiness of the human society that he shuddered to notice the growing tendency in the West towards abdicating religion. Civilization minus religion appeared to him to be nothing but polished animalism that was sure to ruin the entire society like the great empires of the past. He actually raised a note of alarm that the whole of Europe, with its growing apathy to spirituality, was sitting on the top of a volcano which might burst at any moment. The last World War and the present ravages all over Europe of another and a more disastrous one show how far the Swami was correct in his apprehensions. His foreboding is further substantiated by the frank and pathetic confession of Dr. Will Durant of our days: "We in America (the America that abandons religion and God) are engaged in a gigantic experiment as to the possibility of maintaining social order and racial vitality through a moral code resting solely on the earth. The experiment failed in Athens and it failed in renaissant Italy. . . . The process has already undermined the Anglo-Saxon leadership of America in literature, morals and municipal politics; as it goes on (if it goes on) it will probably weaken all the peoples of

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Western Europe and North America. In the end we shall be an extinct volcano."

The Swami was emphatic in his enunciation that the value of the life of an individual or a society was to be assessed on its spiritual progress, and not merely on its material possessions or intellectual attainments. Hence culture of the cardinal virtues, namely, purity, devotion, humility, sincerity, selflessness and love—all that contribute to spiritual progress—should claim our attention more than anything else on earth. He assured his Western audience that this outlook, instead of standing in the way of material and intellectual advancement, would rather go to improve the condition of the world by eliminating all disruptive and disintegrating forces, all clashes and conflicts arising out of the present leaning towards the negation of the nobler traits of human nature. A true religious outlook was the only thing, according to the Swami, that could be expected to transform the fighting and bleeding world into a heaven of peace.

While proclaiming the supreme necessity of religion for the progress of civilization, the Swami was not blind to the historical data regarding the untold sufferings that had been brought upon the human society by fanatics in the name of religion. He was bold and frank enough to admit: "Though there is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet, at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has brought more peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered

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fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion." The Swami, however, pointed out that religion was not to blame for all the misdeeds carried out in its name. Just as neither Newton nor Laplace could be held responsible for the horrors of scientific manslaughter, so neither Christ nor Muhammad could be made liable for the atrocities of crusades and jehads. Religious intolerance and fight proceeded, like all other conflicts, from ignorance, vanity, selfishness and brutality ingrained in the baser nature of man.

Failing to grasp the correct import of religion, people often lose sight of the kernel and fight over husks. The Swami made it clear that quarrels between different religions arose from over-emphasis on secondary details and that there was unanimity regarding the fundamental aim and scope of religion, which he laid down briefly and pointedly in the following words: "The aim is to get rid of nature's control over us. That is the goal of all religions. Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work (Karma-Yoga), worship (Bhakti-Yoga), or psychic control (Rāja-Yoga), or philosophy (Jñāna-Yoga), by one or other or all of

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these, and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details." He drew the attention of all to the fact that the great religions of the world were of one opinion, so far as belief in the existence of God, potential divinity of the soul and possibility of salvation through transcendental experience of God were concerned. All great religions derive their origin and validity from the realizations of one or more seers of outstanding personality. All of them owe allegiance to certain books as their scriptures, and while urging mankind to attain freedom through the knowledge of God, all of them prescribe certain forms and symbols, glorification of names of God, and worship of holy personages as aids to spiritual growth. They are thus essentially alike in substance, though they differ widely in forms. Said the Swami: "The language of the soul is one, the languages of the nations are many; their customs and methods of lives are wholly different. Religion is of the soul and finds expression through various nations, languages and customs. Hence it follows that the difference between the religions of the world is one of expression and not of substance; and their points of similarity and unity are of the soul, intrinsic. The same sweet harmony is vibrant there also, as it is on many and diverse instruments."

The Swami analysed the contents of credal religions into philosophy, mythology and rituals, and assessed the value and significance of each. He said: "We see

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that in every religion there are three parts, I mean in every great and recognized religion. First, there is the philosophy, which presents the whole scope of that religion, setting forth its basic principles, the goal and the means of reaching it. The second part is mythology, which is philosophy made concrete. It consists of legends relating to the lives of men, or of supernatural beings and so forth. It is the abstractions concretized in the more or less imaginary lives of men and supernatural beings. The third part is the ritual. This is still more concrete, and is made up of forms and ceremonies, various physical attitudes, flowers and incense, and many other things that appeal to the senses. In these consists the ritual." Also, "The third portion of all religions is symbolism, which you call ceremonials and forms. Even the expression through mythology, the lives of heroes, is not sufficient for all. There are minds still lower. Like children they must have their kindergarten of religion, and these symbologies evolved concrete examples, which they can handle and grasp and understand, which they can see and feel as material something." The Swami pointed out that the externals had sprung out of a necessity, although they were not absolute and universal in conception and application. He said, "External helps and methods, forms, ceremonies, creeds, doctrines, all have their right place and are meant to support and strengthen us until we become strong. Then they are no more necessary. They are our nurse and as such indispensable in youth." And

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again, "The Hindus have discovered that the Absolute can only be realized, or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses and crescents are simply so many symbols, so many pegs to hang the spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for everyone, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong."

Thus the Swami pointed out that while philosophy was the substantial core, the central theme, the very soul of every religion, mythology and rituals were only its outer sheath, secondary details, mere expressions. While the first is the basis of the invariable and eternal truth, the second group is only a variable superstructure, purporting to be an aid to the realization of the central truth. Just as the same thought may be expressed through a variety of languages, just as the same note may be emitted through a variety of musical instruments, so the same fundamental verities of life and existence, the same philosophy, may be couched in a variety of symbology through different sets of mythology and rituals for facilitating the understanding of different groups of people with different tastes, temperaments and traditions. But sect-bound people do not realize the fact that mythology and rituals have infinite scope for variation without prejudicing the central truth, and that there is no reason for claiming these secondary details to be invariable components of religion. The Swami pointed out that it was owing to this mistaken attitude towards the externals of religion that different sects and communities fought with one another.

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He said, "All religions have their own mythology, only each of them says, 'My stories are not myths,'" and "One sect has one particular form of ritual, and thinks that that is holy, while the rituals of another sect are arrant superstition." This attitude bred of a confusion between essentials and mere externals of religion is at the root of all sectarian dissensions.

Through his momentous announcement on the relativity of mythology and rituals, the world has been furnished with the rationale which may enable it to clear the mass of age-old prejudice that has been clouding sectarian and communal views of religion. It has gone, moreover, to rationalize religion and make it acceptable to the modern mind, which is repelled by preposterous mythologies and apparently senseless rituals. By enunciating the fundamental aim and scope of all religions, stating and explaining the points of essential agreement and of formal difference between them, showing the possibility of variation in the superficial contents of religion, such as mythology and rituals, traditions and customs, the Swami enlightened the world as to how it might eschew both its heretical and sectarian views of religion.

He explained, moreover, the necessity of variation in creeds by pointing out the fact that just as the physical food of man containing the same group of essential ingredients had developed out of sheer necessity thousands of forms to cater to different tastes, similarly religion, the spiritual food of man, had evolved a multitude of creeds on the same funda-

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mentals in order to suit the different temperaments of distinct groups of people. Variety of faiths has enriched the world and made religion accessible, comprehensible and practicable to all men. This is why the Swami said: "Seeing that we are various in our natures, the same method can scarcely be applied to any two of us in the same manner. . . . Some, you will find, are very emotional in their nature, some very philosophical, rational; others cling to all sorts of ritualistic forms, want things which are concrete. . . . And all of these certainly cannot have the same method. If there were only one method to arrive at truth, it would be death for everyone else who is not similarly constituted. . . . From this standpoint we see how glorious it is that there are so many religions in the world, how good it is that there are so many teachers and prophets." Again, "You cannot make all conform to the same ideas; that is a fact, and I thank God that it is so. . . . It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought, that awakes thought. Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum looking vacantly at one another's face—no more than that! . . . The greater the number of sects, the more chance of people getting religion. In the hotel where there are all sorts of food, everyone has a chance to get his appetite satisfied. So I want sects to multiply in every country, that more people may have a chance to be spiritual."

Thus proving the necessity of variation, the

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Swami declared emphatically: "The religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic; they are but various phases of One Eternal Religion; that One Eternal Religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races." The fundamental abstractions of all religions, divested of all special names, forms and local colour, were conceived by the Swami to be the One Eternal Religion, the central pivot on which all the different faiths of the world were resting harmoniously in order to throw open to different groups of individuals various suitable approaches to the central truth. This was the vision of Universal Religion that the Swami unfolded before the human race in order to help it, after centuries of rancorous feuds over credal suzerainty, to step on to a much-needed hall of union. The glorious realization of this Universal Religion, the Swami hoped, would enable all the different sects and communities of the world to reconcile their loyalty to their respective churches with a genuine spirit of unbounded catholicism towards all other faiths. He knew perfectly well that this was not a utopian vision, that such an attitude could be developed both by the intensely religious people as well as by the lukewarm, if only religious teachers would point out to humanity how the essentials of religion were to be discriminated from the variable externals. He himself had seen such an attitude in Ramakrishna and imbibed the same from his Master, and he knew how humanity could be made conscious of Universal Religion by broadcasting the

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fundamental ideas and ideals constituting the science of religion. And the Swami announced: "It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centred in aiding humanity to realize its own true divine nature." He tried to inspire the world with the magnificent ideal of Universal Religion which "must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brāhmaṇic or Buddhistic, Christian or Muhammadan, but the sum total of all these and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms and find a place for every human being."

Finally, in order to convince the world of the feasibility of conceiving and practising the Universal Religion, the Swami, in a mood of apostolic fervour, proclaimed his own burning faith through the epoch-making utterance: "I accept all religions that were in the past and worship them all. I worship God with everyone of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of a Muhammadan, I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the light which

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enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. . . . The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran and all other sacred books are so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it (my heart) open for all of them."

Thus through his rational exposition of the necessity and essentials of religion, and through his elucidation of the grand concept of Universal Religion, the Swami applied the spiritual message of Vedic India, which had been reaffirmed by Ramakrishna's and his own realizations, for vitalizing all the different religions of the world and enabling them to hold their ground before the crusades of scientific findings and critical reason. That the Swami's ideas have filtered down at least to the intellectual strata of the modern West is evident from the unambiguous statement of the present learned editor of *The Unity*, Chicago: "Examine any history of civilization—such a recent and admirable piece of work, for example, as Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*—and see how large a place is occupied by a survey of religious customs and ideas. This is because we all recognize to-day that religion is a part of the experience of man, a product of his essential nature. It is in this sense that all religions, even the most primitive, are not only real but also true. They are true, at least, for the people who believe them in their own stage of psychological development. The time has passed by when we can

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declare that one religion—our own, of course—is true, and all others false. There can no longer be any line of division between the orthodox and heterodox, the Christian and pagan. Religion is as native to the souls of the people who practise it as trees are native to the soil in which they grow. There are many religions, as there are many trees, but all are a growth of nature. 'Religions are many, but Religion is one' —and one because it belongs, like blood and breath, to the very life of man."

AWAKENING THE MOTHERLAND

Swami Vivekananda with his devoted followers, Mr. and Mrs. Sevier and Mr. Goodwin, landed at Colombo on the 15th of January, 1897; and after visiting a few places in Ceylon, the Swami proceeded through Rameswaram, Ramnad, Madura and Madras to Calcutta. From his landing at the quay of Colombo till he reached his destination, eager and enthusiastic crowds gathered at every important place he visited or passed through in Ceylon and South India and overwhelmed him with ovations befitting a great national hero; and before he left any such place the Swami charged the jubilant crowds with his grave and inspiring message. From the second week of May till the end of the year he made an extensive tour of Northern India through the United Provinces, the Punjab, Kashmir and Rajputana; and wherever he went he broadcasted through his animating talks and discourses whatever he had to say about the much-needed salva-

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tion of his beloved motherland. Before sailing again for America in June, 1899, he made another tour of the northern provinces and went on pilgrimage to the holy shrines of Amarnāth and Kshīrbhavānī in Kashmir. He spent nearly two years and a half in India and during this entire period, in spite of his failing health, he worked breathlessly for propagating his message and organizing the corps of his standard-bearers.

His successful mission in the West, confirmed by the unstinted eulogy of the American and European press, had surely invested the Swami with the glory and authority of a great spiritual teacher of exceptional calibre. Towering above all forms of weakness and slavery, he had appeared before the Western world like a pillar of strength, an embodiment of freedom. Amidst depression and helplessness, hatred and jealousy, pride and prejudice, the mighty sponsors of modern civilization had seen in him an apostle of joy and hope, a perennial fountain of love, peace and harmony. The Swami undoubtedly possessed that subtle attractive force which can hardly be defined, but which is invariably found in the make-up of an outstanding spiritual teacher in whom people see almost a fulfilment of their dearest aspirations, a solution of their most pressing problems, a model after which they want to mould their lives. Naturally, among the civilized peoples of the West there were many who had been led by the urge of their own hearts to shower their love, admiration and reverence upon

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him and even to go the length of idolizing and worshipping him as a Divine messenger. Like a true representative of the sages of ancient India, who had discovered the golden thread of unity running through the whole universe, the Swami stood for the whole world, his message was meant for the entire mankind and his love went out to every individual of the human race. His spirit of universalism had appealed very strongly to the imagination of the Western races, who had hailed him as the 'cyclonic monk of India' and discerned in him the likeness of Buddha and Christ.

This unqualified appreciation of the Swami by the progressive people of the West certainly flattered the vanity of his countrymen. They saw in him a redeemer of India's honour. The Indians. who were no better than 'pariahs' in the eyes of the Westerners, whose very complexion was repulsive to the delicate taste of the dominant races of the world, whose religion was looked down upon as arrant superstition and whose social customs were branded as downright barbarism even by the evangels of the Occident, surely had every reason to be proud when one of their own countrymen, Swami Vivekananda, stood up boldly like a living challenge from Mother India to vindicate the worth and glory of her hoary culture and prove to the hilt that the estimate of the foreigners regarding this country had been absolutely erroneous. He had impressed upon the West by his life and teachings that India was not inhabited by savages without any glorious history and culture at their back. He had

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pointed out the fact that Indian history was to be reviewed not by decades or centuries, but by scores of centuries, that even Buddha had been six centuries ahead of Christ, that Indian civilization could be traced to an age when the ancestors of the modern races used to tattoo their limbs, live in caves and forests and subsist on prey, and that even at the dawn of the human history India had her Vedas declaring in unequivocal terms the highest metaphysical abstractions about the identity of the soul and the Absolute and the fundamental unity of the universe.

Very naturally, the 'cyclonic monk of India' was hailed by his countrymen as the 'patriot saint of India.' In him they discovered not only the fulfilment of their human aspirations after perfection but they also found one who touched the tenderest chords of their hearts, who stood as a redoubtable champion of the very cause that was nearest and dearest to them, namely, the sacred cause of their motherland, whose bright past had been totally eclipsed by her gloomy present.

In the midst of his intense activities in the West, the one burning thought that had been consuming him day and night was how he might raise India from the depth of her degradation. The helpless condition of the unlettered, poverty-stricken and down-trodden masses, unrelieved by the sympathy of the rich and the enlightened; the travesty of the lofty ideals of the Vedic religion at the hands of the Pharisaical leaders of the orthodox society forging reprehensible

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formulas of untouchability in the name of religion and dehumanizing the dumb millions by the obnoxious pressure of social iniquities; the abominable self-forgetfulness of the enlightened liberals and their reckless and alarming strides towards Westernism in thoughts and manners; the rapid disintegration of the Hindu society into innumerable fighting sects of fundamentalists and an ever-swelling rank of educated heretics—all these had been oppressing the tender and patriotic heart of Vivekananda as long as he stayed with the methodical, progressive, organized, virile and prosperous races of Europe and America. Many sleepless nights he had spent in luxurious cushions with tears that would stream down his cheeks at the agonizing contrast of the wretchedness of his dear motherland with the prosperity of the Occidental countries. Now and then he had inspired his Madras disciples by his fiery epistles to band themselves together and devote their lives to the sacred cause of the motherland. He had all the while kept this group informed of his own activities and success in the West and stirred up its zeal to emulate the thoroughly organized and perfectly methodical social welfare institutions of the West. The eagle-eyed Swami had observed whatever there was good and worthy of imitation in the Western society, and he had fired the imagination of his Madras disciples with fresh and inspiring ideas born of his ever-widening experience in the lands of modern civilization. In order to stimulate the patriotic as well as religious sentiments of the

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Indians and to direct these on right lines, he had already worked up the enthusiasm of this group of followers to start an English journal and publish it regularly from Madras. Thus, in spite of all his pre-occupations in the West the Swami's keen solicitude for the well-being of India had been almost the central theme of his thoughts and feelings as long as he had been away from his country. And as soon as he touched the soil of India, all the pent-up feelings of his heart for his beloved country surged up tumultuously and rushed out to carry his countrymen before its tempestuous sway. From one end of India to the other, from Colombo to Almora, Swami Vivekananda, like a veritable 'lion of Vedānta' roared to rouse the 'sleeping leviathan.'

Through his teachings, the Indians felt the thrilling touch of their mighty and glorious past; they realized the potency of their age-old culture, the stupendous strength, sublimity as well as utility of the spiritual lore handed down to them by their forefathers, the *ṛishis* of old. Even the enlightened Indians who had been fascinated and enslaved by exotic culture, even the reformed groups who could not have helped sneering at various crude but precious elements of the Hindu Faith, were urged by the Swami to revise their opinion about their own spiritual culture. Then again, in the light of his teachings, his countrymen could measure accurately the depth of their present degradation; they saw clearly how their physical deterioration, inertia and lethargy, their lack

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of manliness, self-help, seriousness, spirit of obedience, practical and organizing capacity, above all, their awful dearth of love, generous feelings and cultural integrity had reduced them to a very miserable sample of humanity and made them almost incapable of rising from this hopeless welter of weakness and confusion. With the same breath the Swami made them discover the infinite potentialities that still lay hidden in the depth of their hearts beneath the superficial film of filth and degradation. And again, through his almost prophetic revelations, they were made to visualize the bright and glorious days of a thoroughly rejuvenated Future India. Whose heart did not leap up and dance with joy when the Swami announced his prophetic vision: "The fiat has gone forth, India must rise." "None can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward powers can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet." "The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, and a voice is coming to us. . . . Like a breeze from the Himalayas, it is bringing life into the almost dead bones and muscles, the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see, or the perverted will not see, that she is awakening, this motherland of ours, from her deep long sleep." Indeed, the Swami stood before them like a divine messenger, pointing with one hand to the glorious past of their motherland and with the other to a still more resplendent future. His words instilled into their

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minds unbounded hope, strength and enthusiasm and inspired in them faith in themselves, faith in their own culture and their deep-seated potentialities.

But the Swami did not want them merely to sing paeans of their ancient glory nor to dance at the sure prospect of a brighter future. Cheering them up by these visions, he urged them to focus their attention entirely on the gloomy present and put their shoulders to the wheel of progress so that it might bring about the much-needed salvation of their motherland. His thundering words propelled them to work and die for the sacred cause, for achieving this blessed goal, and made them conscious of the stupendous nature of the task that lay before them. One may well imagine what a tremendous sense of responsibility was awakened by the Swami's severe injunction: "Our children must know from their very birth that their lives are dedicated to their Motherland."

He burnt in the minds of his countrymen his first and foremost lesson that they themselves were primarily responsible for all their sufferings, and asked them to be bold enough to admit their own mistakes and try seriously to correct them, instead of indulging in vain regrets, or laying the blame entirely at the door of other people. He asked his Hindu brethren to realize the fact that just as individuals reap the fruits of their own actions, so also does the entire society. The national life was also pointed out to be subject to the law of *karma*. If India, through her own follies, had not undermined her own unity and solidarity, and

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lost her own strength and vitality, physical, intellectual as well as spiritual, nothing external would ever have been able to bring this nation, this 'infinite giant,' under its feet. The Swami squeezed out his own blood to confess the failings of his people, whose ancient glories and grandeur of religious culture he had sung in foreign lands. His words fell literally like bombshells upon the entire Indian society when he said, "It is we who are responsible for our . . . degradation. Our aristocratic ancestors went on treading the common masses of the country under foot till they became helpless, till under this torment the poor, poor people forgot that they were human beings." Forgetting the broad and humanistic teachings of the Vedic seers, losing gradually the spark of spiritual life, and consequently setting a premium on the externals of religion and on a strange and unworthy class-consciousness for maintaining and asserting with vengeance their fictitious superiority, the medieval leaders of the Hindu society had stooped to fetter the people with rigid and invidious laws. These social laws, proceeding from narrow visions and contracted hearts characteristic of a period of spiritual bankruptcy, might have served some temporary purpose, but undoubtedly they were permitted by the short-sighted and fanatic social leaders to outlive their utility to the detriment of the health, growth and expansion of the entire society. During this period the Vedic religion, the epitome of catholicism, came to be almost synonymous with a hotbed of untouchability, hatred and

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social tyranny. The foreigners came to be branded as Mlechchhas and Yavanas; severe strictures were passed against sea-voyage; reprehensible excesses of caste-prejudice were encouraged in the name of religion; invidious barriers were raised within the Hindu fold; and acute sect-consciousness came to be the ruling idea of religious life and divided the society into innumerable hostile camps. All these, surely, went to disintegrate the Hindus and disabled them from thinking of uniting with the other religious communities within the land. Thus Hinduism, which could very well boast of furnishing the whole world with lofty ideas, ideals and incentives for establishing Universal Brotherhood, came to be, by an irony of fate, an appalling zone of disintegrating forces.

The Swami pointed out to his countrymen that nothing less than a thorough purging of their narrowness and bigotry, selfishness and social tyranny, could ever be expected to consolidate the nation. If the nation was at all to rise to the heights of glory, it was the essential precondition that the nation must stand united. And he explained how the Hindus might pave the way for national solidarity by developing a universal religious outlook on the basis of the extremely liberal findings of the Upanishadic seers and merging all church-born differences within the land. The Swami emphasized the fact that if the Hindus could again live up to the lofty ideals of their own original scriptures, the Vedānta, they might pull down all barriers that divided man from man, and by this

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process they might develop a gigantic power of cohesion that could integrate all the various Indian sects and communities into one mighty nation.

The Swami, moreover, pointed out that the Vedāntic ideas about the Divinity of the soul, oneness of the universe and of consequent fearlessness, would go not only to unite the people of India by harmonizing all differences, but they would also infuse enormous strength into the nation and raise it from the slough of lethargy and despair. "What our country now wants," said he, "are muscles of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic wills that nothing can resist, which can penetrate into the mysteries and secrets of the universe, and will accomplish their purpose in any fashion, even if it meant going down to the bottom of the ocean and meeting death face to face. That is what we want, and that can only be created, established and strengthened by understanding and realizing the ideal of the Advaita, that ideal of oneness of all." And again, "Let me tell you that we want strength, and every time strength. And the Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world; the whole world can be vivified, made strong, energized through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable and the down-trodden of all races, all creeds and all sects to stand on their own feet and be free; freedom—physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom are the watchwords of the Upanishads." He dinned into the ears of his Hindu compatriots: "Teach

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yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul to see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come and everything that is excellent will come when the sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity."

Thus declaring the Vedānta to be a perennial source of unity and strength, physical as well as mental, the Swami concluded: "The truths of the Upanishads are before you. Take them up, live up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand." He explained how the security of a society or nation depended on the exalted life of the individuals, and how the Vedāntic ideas could achieve this end by vitalizing the people and liberalizing their outlook. And then he declared, with all the emphasis that he could command, that flooding the country with the spiritual ideas and ideals of the Vedānta should be made the very first and most necessary step towards the consolidation of this nation. Addressing particularly his enlightened co-religionists, who under the hypnotic spell of Western culture had become blind to the potency and efficacy of their own religious ideas, the Swami explained clearly why renaissance of Hinduism through the revival of the Vedāntic thoughts should be placed on the forefront of any programme for national reconstruction. He said, "After preaching spiritual knowledge, along with it will come that secular knowledge and every other knowledge that you want. But if you attempt to get the secular knowledge without religion, I tell you plainly, vain is your attempt in

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India, it will never have a hold upon the people." He had travelled all over India, mixed with all types of people within the land, and before his analytical vision it had become absolutely clear how the thoughts and activities, feelings and aspirations of the Hindu masses had been flowing for thousands of years through the channel excavated by the spiritual ideas of the Vedic seers. They might have lost sight of the genuine ideals of their old scriptures, they might have soiled their glorious Vedic religion with accretions of crude, fantastic and narrow views through centuries of exclusive attention to the mere externals of religious life, but it was a fact that could not be denied or controverted that religion, in whatever light it might have appeared to the people, was undoubtedly the greatest motive power that propelled and regulated the life of the Hindu masses. Nothing else could call up their dormant energy, no other stimulus could draw out their vigorous response, no other inspiration could work up their enthusiasm to put forth their best endeavours and make their greatest sacrifices. If the nation was to rise, the masses surely were to be energized, and this could be done only by religion, of course, by religion revitalized and refreshed through the revival of the original Vedāntic ideas. The Swami said, "I see that each nation, like each individual, has one theme in this life, which is its centre, the principal note, round which every other note comes to form the harmony. In one nation political power is its vitality, as in England. Artistic life in another, and so on. In India

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religious life forms the centre, the key-note of the whole music of national life; and if any nation attempts to throw off its national vitality, the direction which has become its own through transmission of centuries, that nation dies, if it succeeds in the attempt. And, therefore, if you succeed in the attempt to throw off religion and take up either politics or society, or any other thing as your centre, as the vitality of your national life, the result will be that you will be extinct. To prevent this you must make all and everything work through that vitality of your religion. Let all your nerves vibrate through the backbone of your religion. I have seen that I cannot preach even religion to Americans without showing them its practical effect on social life. I could not preach religion in England without showing the wonderful political changes the Vedānta would bring. So, in India, social reform has to be preached by showing how much more spiritual a life the new system will bring; and politics has to be preached by showing how much it will improve the one thing that the nation wants—its spirituality. Every man has to make his own choice; so has every nation. We made our choice ages ago, and we must abide by it." The Swami reiterated the supreme necessity of religion in building up the Indian nation: "When the life-blood is strong and pure no disease germ can live in the body. Our life-blood is spirituality. If it flows clear, pure and vigorous, everything is right; political, social, any other material defect, even the poverty of the land will be all cured if that blood is pure." And hence did he

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conclude: "The banner of the spiritual cannot be raised too high in this country. In it alone is salvation."

Thus he pointed out to his educated countrymen, who had been thinking of rebuilding India on plans and schemes borrowed from the West, that so far as India was concerned there could not be any effective method of national awakening and solidarity except through religion. He opened their eyes, moreover, to the fact that the choice of the Hindus of old in making spirituality the basis of their entire civilization, the mainspring of their social, economic and political life, was the greatest achievement of the genius of their race. It was this choice that had enabled the Hindus to survive so many social and political cataclysms and even after a lapse of thousands of years to retain their racial individuality. Nothing could secure and impart durability to a society than the bed-rock of spirituality. The Swami tried to disillusion his Westernized countrymen, who looked at the Indian problems and their solution through imported glasses of politics and radical social reform, by scanning the errors of the dominant races of the world and the jeopardized state of their society: "The political systems that we are struggling for in India have been in Europe for ages, have been tried for centuries and have been found wanting. One after another the institutions, systems, and everything connected with political governments have been condemned as useless, and Europe is restless, does not know where to turn .... It is hopeless and

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perfectly useless to govern mankind with the sword. You will find that the very centres from which such ideas as government by force sprang up are the very first centres to degrade and degenerate and crumble to pieces. Europe, the centre of the manifestation of the material energy, will crumble to pieces within fifty years if she is not mindful to change her position, to shift her ground and make spirituality the basis of her life." Almost like a prophet of the age, Vivekananda declared that even the latest movements of socialism or communism would never be able to achieve their goal until and unless they took their stand on spiritual ideals. Said the Swami: "Everything goes to show that socialism or some form of rule by the people, call it what you will, is coming on the boards. The people will certainly want the satisfaction of their material needs, less work, no oppression, no war, more food. What guarantee have we that this or any civilization will last, unless it is based on religion, on the goodness of men? Depend on it, religion goes to the root of the matter. If it is all right, all is right." According to the Swami nothing could be more erroneous than to look upon religion as the opiate of the people, though, obviously, crude, narrow and sanctimonious churchianity, bred of an era of spiritual bankruptcy, might be held considerably responsible for weakening, enslaving and even dehumanizing people. He, therefore, was vehement in announcing: "I claim that no destruction of religion is necessary to improve the Hindu society, and that this state of society exists not on account of

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religion, but because religion has not been applied to society, as it should have been. This I am ready to prove from our old books, every word of it. This is what I teach, and this is what we must struggle all our lives to carry out."

One finds almost an echo of the Swami's ideas regarding the function of religion as a preserver of the health and well-being of the society in the following passage penned by Mr. H. G. Wells, one of the prominent English thinkers of the present generation: "The overriding powers that hitherto, in the individual soul and in the community, have struggled and prevailed against the ferocious, base, and individual impulses that divide us from one another have been the powers of religion and education. Religion and education, those closely interwoven influences, have made possible the greater human societies . . . they have been the chief synthetic forces through the great story of enlarging human co-operations. We have found in the intellectual and theological conflicts of the nineteenth century the explanation of that curious exceptional disentanglement of religious teaching from formal education which is a distinctive feature of our age, and we have traced the consequences of this phase of religious disputation and confusion in the reversion of international politics towards a brutal nationalism, and in the backward drift of industrial and business life towards harsh, selfish and uncreative profit-seeking. There has been a slipping off of ancient restraint—a de-civilization of men's minds." Thus ascribing 'the

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terrible experiences of the World War' to the divorce of religion from formal education, the learned author refreshes us with the hope that "presently education must become again in intention and spirit religious, and that the impulse to devotion, to universal service and to a complete escape from self, which has been the common underlying force in all the great religions of the last five-and-twenty centuries—an impulse which ebbed so perceptibly during the prosperity, laxity, disillusionment and scepticism of the past seventy or eighty years—will reappear again, stripped and plain, as the recognized fundamental structural impulse in human society."

Either Mr. Wells's hopes will be fulfilled—of course, only if Europe, according to the Swami, takes care "to change her position, shift her ground and make spirituality the basis of her life"—or 'the terrible experiences of the World War' have every likelihood of repeating themselves and causing Europe to 'crumble to pieces.' To prevent such a catastrophe the Swami preached the universal humanizing doctrines of the Vedānta stirring up verily 'the impulse to devotion, to universal service and to a complete escape from self.' And also for resuscitating his motherland he preached the identical message of the Upanishads.

He laid before his countrymen practical formulas of social service deduced from the fundamental teachings of the Vedānta. He exhorted them to look upon the poor, the illiterate and the depressed masses as manifestations of Divinity. "God is here before

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you in various forms," said the Swami, "he who loves His creatures serves God." He enjoined on the classes to feel intensely for the misery of the teeming millions and to serve them with all the devotion, sacrifice and reverence due to deified humanity. The Swami's piercing words are still ringing in one's ears: "Where should you go to seek for God? Are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak, gods? Why not worship them first? Why go to dig a well on the shores of the Ganges? Let these people be your God—think of them, work for them, pray for them incessantly, the Lord will show you the way." "Him I call a *mahātman* (high-souled one) whose heart bleeds for the poor, otherwise he is a *durātman* (wicked one)." "I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. They are practically our slaves. If we want to regenerate India, we must work for them." "So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them!" Thus did the Swami make the classes conscious of their duties towards the masses. To raise the masses, to 'give them back their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature' was what he prescribed to all who desired national progress, as their

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religion, and he assured them that this would serve the twin purpose of their own spiritual advancement and of the rehabilitation of the country. He declared emphatically: "The national ideals of India are renunciation and service. Intensify her in those channels and the rest will take care of itself."

Thus his compatriots were urged to feel intensely with the Swami that their nation practically lived in the cottage, that the bulk of the population, 'two-hundred millions of men and women' were 'sunken for ever in poverty and ignorance.' He made it clear that if the nation was ever to stand on its feet, the rich, the learned, the privileged must come down with their quota of service, carry food and education to the door of the cottage and thus lift up the masses. They were required to forget for a time all thoughts of luxury and self-aggrandizement and sacrifice their energy and resources, as much as they possibly could, in the interest of the masses, without making any distinction between castes, creeds or communities. "First of all," said the Swami, "you must remove this evil of hunger and starvation, this constant thought of bare existence," and then "Let them know what our forefathers as well as other nations have thought on the most momentous questions of life. Let them see specially what others are doing now and decide. We are to put the chemicals together and the crystallization will be done by nature according to her laws."

And this dissemination of the genuine Vedāntic teachings on religion along with up-to-date secular

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education was declared by the Swami to be the panacea for all social evils. This would go to revitalize all who suffered from social iniquities, the masses, the untouchables, the women, and enable them to grow, think for themselves and solve their own problems. The sunken vitality of the helpless victims of social tyranny was to be restored by providing them with life-giving food, physical, intellectual as well as spiritual. This was what the Swami meant by putting the chemicals together. Once this was done, once the down-trodden section of the society could recover their lost vigour, physical as well as mental, they would become efficient enough to evolve new social laws, new institutions suited to the pressing requirements of the modern age. And this was what he meant by his statement, "The crystallization will be done by nature according to her laws." Helping this growth from within, this natural expansion of national life, was what the Swami insisted upon as the immediate task of all social workers. He did not, like the orthodox, want to fix the society eternally in the groove of old and out-of-date customs and traditions. He felt the urgency of a new Smṛiti (code of social laws) based on the fundamental Vedāntic doctrines and yet suited to the altered conditions of modern life. But instead of pruning recklessly the old customs and traditions and forcing a new code of social laws upon the society like the radical reformers of the day, the Swami believed in expecting the growth of the depressed wing through the spread of genuine culture made up of all that is

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best and congenial in the Eastern as well as in the Western world of thoughts and habits; and he was very firm in his conviction that this would eventually lead the revitalized and enlightened sufferers to evolve the new Smṛiti of this age and recover all the privileges that are necessary for the health and equilibrium of the whole society. This was why the Swami said, "Until higher institutions are evolved, any attempt to break the old ones will be disastrous." Thus in the field of social reform, he preferred the process of evolution to that of revolution. He encouraged neither drastic reform from above nor fight from below; both were ruinous. The former would convulse the cultural ideas, and the latter would force the ebbing life out of the social body. He proclaimed, "I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been inconsiderate imitations of Western means and methods of work, and that surely will not do for India."

Instead of cursing or condemning the people even for 'the most superstitious and the most irrational' of their institutions, the Swami asked all social reformers to realize the fact that "even those customs that are now appearing to be positive evils, have been positively life-giving in times past," and said to them, "If we have to remove these, we must not do so with curses, but with blessings and gratitude for the glorious work these customs have done for the preservation of our race." Moreover, he felt that even the current abuses of some worthy institutions of the past were to be

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corrected not by any rash and peremptory command, but by treating the society psychologically, as a modern pedagogue would do with an individual. The society was to be led gently to realize its own errors and made strong enough to eliminate by a healthy, natural and evolutionary process all that would appear to it to be prejudicial to its progress. "Feed the national life with the fuel it wants, but the growth is its own; none can dictate its growth." And again, "Take man where he stands and from thence give him a lift. . . . What can you and I do? Do you think that you can teach even a child? You cannot. The child teaches himself. Your duty is to afford opportunities." Invigorating the people, physically and intellectually, and spiritualizing their views were the tasks of the earnest and patient social worker. He believed that if the society could have a spiritual bath in the life-giving waters of the Vedānta, it would of itself eliminate all the poisonous accretions on its beliefs and practices. This would, he believed, 'take out by the roots the very causes of the disease and not keep them merely suppressed.' He declared: "All healthy social changes are the manifestations of the spiritual forces working within, and if these are strong and well adjusted, society will adjust itself accordingly." And he said to his people, "Meddle not with so-called social reform, for there cannot be any reform without spiritual reform first." And again, "You must go down to the basis of the thing, to the very root of the matter. That is what I call radical reform. Put the

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fire there and let it burn upwards and make an Indian nation."

Finally, he charged his countrymen with their immediate, solemn and sacred duty in the following words: "Close your lips and let your hearts open. Work out the salvation of your land and of the whole world, each of you thinking that the entire burden is on your shoulders." Indeed the Swami was not obsessed by any type of parochial patriotism. His intense love for his own country, as the custodian of some of the best and loftiest ideas and ideals of human life, had a universal bearing; it was related harmoniously to his love for the entire world. He believed that the untold sufferings of the weak, the miserable, the down-trodden of all races could be mitigated only by the application on a world-wide scale of the Vedāntic ideas, such as the Divinity of the soul and oneness of the universe. Through these alone could the dismayed, confounded and distressed world realize its dreams of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. The Vedānta alone furnishes the human groups with the universal and rational basis for their coveted edifice of Brotherhood of nations. But the world cannot possibly accept the Vedāntic findings for readjusting its affairs before it finds convincing proofs of their worth in Indian life. Hence he was convinced that the path of the redemption of the world lay through the redemption of India through the potency of her Vedāntic culture. A practical demonstration of this potency by the Hindu society would automatically set

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the world moving towards a thorough overhauling of its modern civilization in the light of the Vedāntic teachings. This was why the Swami was particularly keen about making his countrymen alive to their ancient ideals, and spurring them on to resuscitate their individual as well as social life by reviving and realizing those glorious ideals. A complete renaissance of Hinduism with all its various phases and a consequent rejuvenation of Indian life on all fronts appeared to him to be a necessary step towards the amelioration of the sufferings of the entire human race. He pointed out to his countrymen that this was precisely the mission, to fulfil which India had outlived centuries of oppression and vandalism. India had been still alive, the Swami believed, because she had yet to deliver her treasures, the universal findings of her ancient seers, to the entire human race and breathe fresh life into human civilization by orienting it towards the Universal Spirit, the supreme ruler of the macrocosm as also of the microcosm. He believed that India, in spite of her present cultural chaos and social and political degradation, was sure to become self-conscious and rise, healthy and strong, to the full heights of her glory and propagate her ennobling spiritual ideals all over the globe, as in the heyday of Buddhist evangelism. She would help with her gospel of universal love for deified humanity the entire mankind to advance surely and steadily in a really progressive career. Such being his reading about the holy and lofty mission of his motherland, the Swami

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exhorted his countrymen to remember, even while they were engaged in building up their own nation, the central fact that they were required to stand for universal peace and harmony and to extend their unqualified love and service to all parts of the world for all time to come.

One has really to dive deep into the Swami's presentation of India's past, exploration of her present and vision of her future, before one can possibly realize the depth and wisdom of his findings, and exhortations to his countrymen. It is, however, apparent that Swami Vivekananda's clarion call "Awake, arise and stop not till the goal is reached" is still ringing in the ears of his people, rousing them alike from their inertia of centuries and hypnotic spell of the immediate present, and thus awakening his dear, dear motherland from her 'deep long sleep.'

CONSOLIDATING HIS MISSION

Besides touring over the length and breadth of India and broadcasting his life-giving message everywhere, Swami Vivekananda thought it absolutely necessary to make practical arrangements for training up a corps of standard-bearers who might, by their lives as well as by preaching, keep his essentially spiritual ideals aflame. And this had to be done for generations to come. Hence he wanted to start a permanent organization that might establish real man-making institutions in India and abroad for turning out individuals who would live up to the lofty spiritual

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ideals and dedicate their lives to the uplift of humanity. Naturally, he conceived that this organization must be monastic in its basic structure, and that instead of being exclusive and individualistic in its spiritual aspirations like the traditional monastic orders, it must work in co-operation with the high-souled and interested public for the much-needed service of mankind, without discriminating between creeds and colours. The service was to consist purely in helping the growth of all concerned through distribution of spiritual, intellectual and physical food according to the needs of the sufferers.

At the earliest opportunity after his return from America he approached his brother-disciples, who had meanwhile shifted the Barnagore monastery to a neighbouring place called Alambazar, and mooted his ideas before them. He convinced them, though with a little initial difficulty, that the ideas were not entirely his own, that these really came from the Master, Ramakrishna himself. "Oh, I have work to do!" he said, "I am a slave of Ramakrishna, who left his work to be done by me and will not give me rest till I have finished it!" His brother-disciples remembered how Vivekananda had been snubbed by the Master for his ardent desire for spending his life in complete self-absorption. Surely it was the Master's wish that had made him feel intensely and work incessantly for his country and the world. He said to them in mystic language, "There is no rest for me. What Ramakrishna called Kālī took possession of my soul and

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body three or four days before he left this earth. And that forces me to work, work, and never allows me to busy myself with my own personal needs."

Thus he persuaded his brother-disciples, who had meanwhile developed into robust spiritual stalwarts, to see through his eyes the import and significance of Ramakrishna's life and teachings and induced them in this way to incorporate in the scheme of their monastic organization the ideal of serving suffering humanity as a manifestation of Divinity. He made them conscious of the fact that they were required by the Master to evolve an altogether new order of monks combining all the spiritual methods of *jñāna, bhakti, yoga* and *karma,* of which Ramakrishna's life was a perfect and glorious epitome. Their minds were to dive deep into meditation, plunge into spiritual ecstasy and again to rise, to vibrate in sympathy with the anguish of suffering humanity. Through meditation they were to realize God in the depth of their own existence, and through service they were to realize the selfsame God, the Virāj, in the entire universe. And these two processes were to go on alternately and rhythmically like one's own breath. Individual salvation and service of deified humanity were to be blended harmoniously to form the motto of the new order of monks. Ramakrishna had come not merely to copy but to fulfil the spiritual traditions of the past. He had made room for all faiths facilitating the fellowship of men, and his spiritual children were required to live up to and carry his supreme message to every corner

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of the world, and try to save humanity from its confusion of cultural ideas and avert the consequent catastrophe towards which the world was rushing recklessly.

With his spiritual brothers and all the lay disciples of Ramakrishna, the Swami laid the foundation of a corporate body, named the Ramakrishna Mission, on the first of May, 1897. This Mission was to train monastic workers to live up to and propagate the Vedāntic religion in the light of Ramakrishna's life and teachings, establish fellowship among the followers of different religions and serve suffering humanity without making any distinction of caste, creed or community.

With money contributed by his devoted English admirer Miss Henrietta F. Müller and by his American follower Mrs. Ole Bull, the Swami purchased lands at Belur on the opposite bank of the Ganges about five miles up Calcutta, built up a monastery there and endowed it with a permanent fund, thereby providing his organization with a home of its own. Thus, in January, 1899, the Belur Math (monastery) was established, and it was to serve as the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order of monks, its principal centre of monastic training, and the place from which were to be started, guided and regulated branch Maths in different parts of India and foreign countries. And the Belur Math, naturally, came to be also the *de facto* headquarters of all missionary and philanthropic activities of the Ramakrishna Mission organization.

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After his return from his second tour in the West, in 1901, the Swami imparted to his monastic organization a legal status through a deed of trust, and made his brother-disciple Swami Brahmananda, pre-eminently the fittest of them all on account of his towering spiritual personality and outstanding organizing capacity, the first President of the Trustees. Swami Saradananda, the capable, cool-headed and infinitely patient apostle, was replaced by the vastly erudite Swami Abhedananda in the New York centre, and the former was entrusted with the charge of helping Swami Brahmananda in the task of organizing all the different activities of the Order.

Swami Premananda, one of the prominent apostles conspicuous for his spotless purity and unbounded love, was entrusted with the task of managing the affairs of the Belur monastery. Meanwhile a few ardent young souls had been admitted into the Order. In 1898 some of the Western followers of the Swami including Sister Nivedita came over to India, and all these novitiates were placed under systematic and necessary spiritual training. Swami Ramakrishnananda, the peerlessly steadfast devotee of Ramakrishna who had stuck to the monastery from its very inception after the Master's departure, was sent to start a centre at Madras as early as March, 1897. Towards the middle of the same year, another brother-disciple and highly advanced spiritual soul, Swami Shivananda, was despatched to preach the message of the Master in Ceylon. And in February,

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1899, two other brother-disciples were sent over to Gujerat. Besides sending out monks for missionary work, the Swami stirred up the enthusiasm of his spiritual brothers and disciples for carrying on relief work among people distressed by famines or epidemics at various places in Bengal and Bihar. Swami Akhandananda, who had, even before the Swami's return from America, done some educational work in the slums of Khetri in Rajputana, went over to relieve the famine-stricken people of Murshidabad and eventually opened there, in 1899, the first permanent home of service of the Ramakrishna Mission. In March of the same year, Vivekananda, with the help of Mr. and Mrs. Sevier's energy and resources, realized his desire for a cosmopolitan Himalayan monastery by establishing the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati, in the district of Almora. A few months later, the monthly English journal *Prabuddha Bharata* (Awakened India) was transferred from Madras to Mayavati, and placed under the management of Mr. Sevier and the editorship of one of the Swami's ablest Indian disciples, Swami Swarupananda. And in the beginning of the same year a monthly Bengali journal, *Udbodhan*, had been started and published from Calcutta under the able editorship of Swami Trigunatita.

Thus through Sri Ramakrishna's inspiration and Swami Vivekananda's one-pointed devotion, a monastic organization with an absolutely new spiritual outlook suited to the requirements of the age was ushered into existence. Regarding this momentous event Sister

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Nivedita remarked: "And for the first time in the history of India an order of monks found themselves banded together with their faces set primarily towards the evolution of new forms of civic duty. In Europe, where the attainment of the direct religious sense is so much rarer, and so much less understood than in the East, such labour ranks as devotional in common acceptance. But in India, the head and front of the demand made on a monastic order is that it produce saints. And the value of the monk who, instead of devoting himself to maintaining the great tradition of the superconscious life, turns back to help society upwards, has not in the past been clearly understood." Ramakrishna's realization of deified humanity had verily bridged over the gulf between spiritual practice and civic duty and thus opened the path for spiritualizing the entire human race. And the religion of the recluse was brought by Vivekananda from the seclusion of caves and forests to the heart of the society in order to give the much-needed spiritual lift to the secular wing of humanity, which was jeopardizing the very existence of mankind by straying away from ancient ideals. It was precisely to meet this demand of the age, to save the earth from the impending catastrophe emerging out of sectarian, communal, national, racial as well as heretical prejudices, selfishness and conflicts, that Sri Ramakrishna, through his able apostle Swami Vivekananda, opened the magnificent aqueduct through which the energizing and deifying waters of spirituality

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might flow from the depths of seclusion to inundate and invigorate the entire human society.

On the 20th June, 1899, the Swami set out on another journey to the West, where this time he spent nearly a year and a half. He induced one of his great brother-disciples, Swami Turiyananda, to accompany him, as he wanted to place before his American followers a living example of the well-disciplined life of a Vedāntic monk of India. Vivekananda proceeded through London and New York to the Pacific coast of the United States. Here also, as in the States of the east, centre and middle west, where he had concentrated his activities during his previous visit to the country, the people became exceedingly interested in his teachings, and several Vedānta centres were started, the prominent among which was the one at San Francisco. Leaving this centre as also the neighbouring ones under the care of Swami Turiyananda and finding his New York Vedānta Society safe in the able hands of Swami Abhedananda, he left America in July, 1900, to attend the Congress of the History of Religions in Paris.

He spent nearly three months in France, particularly in Paris, and attended the Congress, where he came in intimate contact with several distinguished persons like Patrick Geddes of the Edinburgh University, Monsieur Jules Bois, Père Hyacinthe, Mr. Hiram Maxim, Madame Calve, Madame Sarah Bernhardt, Princess Demidoff and Dr. J. C. Bose. Leaving Paris towards the end of October, he visited some of the prominent countries of central Europe and then pro-

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ceeded through Egypt to India, reaching the Belur monastery on the 9th December, 1900.

A few days after his return, in January, 1901, he paid a short visit to the Mayavati Advaita Ashrama, and after a few months made a public tour of some of the districts of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Towards the end of the year, Rev. Oda, a learned Buddhist abbot of a Japanese monastery, together with a companion, Mr. Okakura, came all the way from Japan to invite the Swami to attend a religious congress to be held in their country. Under the tremendous pressure of his breathless activities, his health had broken down, and he had to be confined to bed. Yet he accepted the invitation from Japan, as he was moved by the earnestness of the Buddhist abbot, who said to him, "If such a distinguished person as you take part in the congress, it will be a success. You must come and help us. Japan stands in need of a religious awakening, and we do not know of any one else who can bring about this much-desired consummation." His failing health, however, did not permit him to go over to Japan. With Mr. Okakura he went on a pilgrimage to Bodh-Gaya, and thence he went to Benares. This journey was undertaken in spite of his bad health in the earlier months of 1902. At Benares he inspired a band of enthusiastic young men to serve the diseased and the helpless, which led this group eventually to build up the Benares Home of Service under the auspices of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Thus, after spreading the message of his beloved

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Master in India, Europe and America, and consolidating his Mission by organizing the Ramakrishna Order of monks, inspiring it with his ideas and ideals and placing it on a permanent and secure basis, Swami Vivekananda passed away on the 4th July, 1902, at the premature age of thirty-nine. Within such a brief span of life the Indian Prometheus of our age, unlike the classical hero, did bring down the celestial fire at God's own command, and utilize it in bringing about a new order of things—in building up a new world where science was to shake hands with religion, different faiths were to stand united on the same pedestal of Universal Religion, the downtrodden masses were to be released from age-old oppressions, human civilization was to be secured firmly on a spiritual basis, and the entire human race was to get a fresh lease of healthy and useful life and to march triumphantly in a really progressive career under the banner of "Renunciation and Service—Universal Love, Peace and Harmony."

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IV

Glimmerings of a New Dawn

THE RAMAKRISHNA MATH AND MISSION

Swami Vivekananda had assured his brother-disciples that Sri Ramakrishna's appearance marked the dawn of a new era of a universal spiritual awakening and world federation on a spiritual basis, and that as days rolled on, they would perceive how the influence of the life and message of the Master would spread in ever-widening circles over the entire human society for meeting the supreme demand of the age. After the Swami passed away, the Ramakrishna Order of monks, under the benign spiritual aegis of the Holy Mother and the able steering of Swami Brahmananda, with the substantial co-operation of his brother-disciples, went on growing in bulk by admitting new members to the Order and extending its missionary and philanthropic activities on the lines chalked out by the departed leader.

In course of time, with the broadening of its scope of public work and consequent increase of its responsibilities, the organization had to split itself formally into two distinct bodies. For efficient management as also for the unavoidable exigency of imparting a legal status to the service aspect of the organization, all philanthropic, educational, charitable and missionary activ-

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ities were placed under a corporate body in 1909, and registered formally as 'The Ramakrishna Mission' under Act XXI of 1860 of the Governor-General of India in Council. The objects and methods of work were clearly enunciated and laid down in the Memorandum of Association, and all this was done in strict conformity with the line of action pointed out by Swami Vivekananda. According to the rules, the Trustees of the Belur Math formed the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission, which also had its headquarters at the Belur Math. Swami Brahmananda, who had continued to be the President of the Trustees of the Belur Math since 1901, became the President also of the formally registered Ramakrishna Mission, and he held both these offices till the end of his life in 1922. He was succeeded by Swami Shivananda, who also held both the offices till he passed away in 1934, when this leadership passed on successively to Swami Akhandananda, Swami Vijnanananda, Swami Suddhananda and Swami Virajananda. And from the beginning, the grave and onerous function of the Secretary was carried on with great skill and precision by Swami Saradananda till his passing away in 1927; then this charge came to be entrusted to Swami Suddhananda, Swami Virajananda and Swami Madhavananda, one after another.

The Trustees of the Belur Math, among other things, look after the spiritual training, growth and consolidation of the Ramakrishna Order of monks, and start, guide and control branch monasteries as training

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grounds of the members of the Order at various suitable places; while the Ramakrishna Mission carries on different types of social service work, including temporary relief measures during floods, famines, earthquakes, epidemics and other such occasional calamities, as well as regular and continuous charitable, missionary and educational measures through permanent institutions in the shape of hospitals, dispensaries, maternity and child-welfare centres, preaching centres, orphanages, industrial schools, residential high schools and primary schools both for boys and girls, hostels for school and college students, as also arrangements for part-time cultural training and peripatetic teaching for the masses. In the course of a little more than three decades after the passing away of Swami Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Order has been able to count its monastic members by hundreds and spread almost a network of branch monasteries (*maṭhas* and *āśramas*) all over India; while the Ramakrishna Mission has within this period carried on relief works on numerous occasions in different parts of this country and established its permanent humanitarian institutions at various places in India, Burma, Ceylon and the Federated Malaya States; and quite a number of preaching centres have been opened in North America, South America and Europe. Besides all these, the steadfast devotion of the monks of this Order to the ideal presented by the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, and their practice as well as preaching through talks and discourses and through a number of

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English monthlies published in India and America and several journals in different vernaculars of this country, have been gradually inspiring people with the spirit of the Master.

RESURGENCE OF HINDU CULTURE

When a person comes safely out of the deadly grip of a terrible disease, there is often to be found a resurgence of life that is noticeable in every limb and every movement. This is true also of the spiritual life of a society. A society, like a living organism, also goes through a process of rejuvenation after a period of spiritual torpor, and then the pulsations of a fresh and reinvigorated life become manifest through each of its limbs and movements. The spiritual awakening of a society is invariably accompanied by a revival of arts, letters, science, philosophy and, as a matter of fact, by a vigorous display of energy through every phase of social life. The historical data of India prove this fact conclusively. India has passed through a number of successive phases of ebb and flow of her spiritual life, and with each epoch of religious upheaval there has always been an all-embracing renaissance of her cultural life.

It is encouraging to notice that with the resurgence of Hinduism in all its phases in the wake of Sri Ramakrishna's life has synchronized a steady cultural revival of the Hindus on all fronts. Sri Ramakrishna passed away in 1886 and Swami Vivekananda in 1902, and the very beginning of the twentieth century is marked

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unmistakably by a complete recovery of the cultural self-consciousness of the Hindu community, and this is expressing itself through the different activities of its social life.

With Swami Vivekananda's preaching of the universal doctrines of the Vedānta in the Western countries, the ancient religion of the Hindus has been released from the stigma of a crude and superstitious creed, and it has positively stepped on to a new phase of evangelism that has been termed 'Aggressive Hinduism' by Sister Nivedita. The term connotes the fresh missionary zeal infused into Hinduism, though it does not appear to be quite appropriate in revealing the absolutely catholic and universal character of its teachings. Hinduism has become aggressive not in the sense of seeking converts to any particular fold, but as confirming the faith of all people in their respective churches by furnishing them with the underlying rationale of all creeds. The Hindus are no longer ashamed of any constituent of their religious faith and philosophy of life. On the other hand, they are found in the rôles of bold exponents of 'the Hindu view of life' even before the universities, scholars and savants of Europe and America, and many among their Western audience are found to be really interested in the hoary culture of the Hindus. And it is, moreover, a fact that a few leading intellectuals of the Occident have become no less enthusiastic in broadcasting the Hindu ideas and ideals.

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The Hindus are becoming justly proud of the momentous achievements of their forefathers not only in the fields of religion and philosophy but also on the various secular fronts of social life, and are naturally fired with a remarkable zeal for unearthing the buried past and arriving at correct findings regarding the ancient and medieval history of India. A band of brilliant historians and archaeologists has come up from Indian universities and set itself seriously to construct this important and necessary plank of nation-building. One remembers how Swami Vivekananda, while at Alwar in the early nineties of the last century, felt intensely the need of an Indian school of historical research, and one surely feels delighted to see how the Swami's wish is being fulfilled by the urge of the national mind.

Though the National Congress of India was inaugurated in 1885 with the object of bringing about political advancement of the country through constitutional measures, and though the idea of nationalism in India has been developing since then, it is undoubtedly the dawn of the present century that has seen an unprecedented wave of patriotic fervour throughout the land. Since the beginning of this century, a strong and genuine feeling for the social, political and economic well-being of India has seized the nation with a pre-eminent vigour. Social service institutions for the uplift of the masses are being established in different parts of the country not only by the Ramakrishna Mission but also by various other national

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organizations; relief works for serving distressed humanity during occasional calamities are also being conducted by different groups of social workers besides the Ramakrishna Mission. Educational institutions co-ordinating the Vedic ideals with modern academic requirements have been springing up under the auspices of several organizations and under the inspiration and guidance of great patriots like Dr. Tagore and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Indian patriotism, instead of developing on narrow and parochial lines, appears to have become broad-based on a genuine feeling of universal brotherhood. The non-violent creed of Mahatma Gandhi, the universalism of Rabindra Nath Tagore and the message of harmony of faiths and inter-racial concord of the followers of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda characterize Indian patriotism by a positively humanistic and spiritual outlook. One who cares to see through things is sure to perceive that the political ways and means sometimes imported haphazardly from the West by heedless enthusiasts are passed through the sieve of the spiritual consciousness of the Indian people. Who knows whether this process may not evolve in course of time a method that will suffice to advance the political and economic interests of the nation and yet conform to the spiritual instincts of this race for realizing the ideal of universal brotherhood of nations? The very necessity of broadening its social and religious outlook for uniting the different sectarian and communal groups within the land may

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surely be expected to liberalize the nation's views about all the various peoples on earth.

The school of Oriental arts is a product of this period; and it is interesting to observe that besides Mr. Havell and Dr. Abanindra Nath Tagore, the name of Sister Nivedita has also to be remembered in connection with the revival of this phase of the cultural life of India. Not satisfied with merely copying the artistic productions of Europe and depending entirely on the techniques and inspiration of the West, India has discovered her old genius and tradition of the fine arts and taken a resolute stand to revive, develop and expand them by assimilating the best and conformable elements from the Western school.

In the field of letters, India has already made a mark in this century through the precious idealistic contributions of Tagore to the literary treasure-house of the world. Besides, it may be noticed that all the vernaculars within the land, with Bengali as the vanguard, have commenced a progressive career within this period. Hundreds of worthy writers have made their appearance to enrich and exalt the different Indian languages, inaugurating in this way an era of literary renaissance all over the country.

It is particularly within this period that the spirit of scientific research has spread over India through the different universities, and already some of the scientists of this country have obtained distinctive honour from foreign institutes of science. It is worth noticing that even in this academic field, the researches

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of Sir J. C. Bose on the sensation in plant life bear the characteristic hall-mark of the ancient Hindu mind. He himself confessed before his Western audience that he was demonstrating with modern instruments, and elucidating through modern scientific ideology, a truth about plant life that had been discovered ages ago by the Hindu seers. Sir P. C. Ray's *History of Hindu Chemistry* and Sir B. N. Seal's *Positive Sciences of the Hindus* show unmistakably how the self-consciousness of the Hindu mind is expressing itself even in the realm of science, by recovering and holding before the world all that Ancient India thought and achieved. By linking up modern achievements with the ancient ones, not only in pure science but also in its applied branches like Āyurveda (Medicine), and Jyotish (Astronomy), India is presenting before all a continued and systematic history of the cultural evolution of the Hindus related to the pursuit of scientific truths.

THE OCCIDENT IN THE MELTING POT

Thus in every branch of thought and activity of Indian life there has been an appreciable resurgence with the beginning of this century, and through each the cultural self-consciousness of the people has been asserting itself. But, unfortunately, our Western brothers and sisters have been, during this period, passing through an ordeal of fire. Their fairly old ideas of invidious nationalism, unscrupulous imperialism and capitalism, their over-emphasized class-

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consciousness and snobbish fastidiousness on the question of racial superiority, and their recent confusion about religious ideals have set their entire society aflame. Forces for equalizing human interests and levelling the status of social and national units have been let loose from the hearts of the depressed and suppressed millions, and these are clashing sharply with the forces on behalf of vested interests and hitherto unhampered avarice and unchallenged superiority. The result has been a disastrous loss of balance within and outside the nations, giving rise to internecine revolutions and fratricidal wars. The maxim of 'survival of the fittest' has been deduced from the process of the evolution of brutes and applied thoughtlessly to the progress of human society, forgetting the fact that man has the divine prerogative of appreciating the ennobling potency of the ideal of self-sacrifice of the strong for the weak, the ideal of martyrdom and self-immolation for the benefit of the ignorant and the helpless, the ideal of offering one's own neck like Buddha for saving the life of a goat, or of ascending the cross like Christ and blessing the blind and perverted tyrants. People in their confusion do not realize that it is the spiritually fittest who really survive others—that it is Buddha and Christ who live through centuries, and not the merciless wielders of the forces of destruction. Unfortunately, the people at the helm of affairs in the Western countries are still clinging to the mad doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest,' interpreting it, of course, in terms of physical

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force and ingenious jugglery of the intellect, and, naturally, the conflicting interests within their lands are trying breathlessly to decide the issue by a severe and inhuman application of this brute maxim. Wading through the blood of brothers, the European nations are about to readjust their domestic and foreign affairs! After the terrific ravages of the last war, several internal revolutions came one after another in different countries, followed by a number of campaigns of imperialistic aggression culminating in another catastrophic war of nations. Who knows what is to be the fate of Europe, and with it that of the whole world? Who can say that the Western world is not passing through a necessary and transitional phase of sad experience in order to correct its old mistakes and confusions about human ideals and readjust its society on a broader, healthier and more exalted basis? Who can assert that the gloomy and ominous present of the Occident may not prove to be a prelude to a more glorious future?

PROMISING PROLOGUE TO A GLORIOUS FUTURE

Mr. H. G. Wells, however, raises one's hopes by remarking, towards the close of his *Outline of History*, "But out of this trouble and tragedy of this time and the confusion before us there may emerge a moral and intellectual revival, a religious revival, of a simplicity and scope to draw together men of alien races and now discrete traditions into one common and sustained way of living for the world's service . . . . Religious

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emotion, stripped of corruptions and freed from its last priestly entanglements, may presently blow through life again like a great wind, bursting the doors and flinging open the shutters of the individual life, and making many things possible and easy that in these present days of exhaustion seem almost too difficult even to desire." The keen intellect of the erudite author has perhaps visualized the correct picture of a happy future; his robust optimism may infuse hope and enthusiasm into the bleeding heart of the Western society. But Mr. Wells cannot yet assure us as to when and where this moral, intellectual and religious revival is to begin its beneficent course. He points out, nevertheless, that such an epoch-making revival is likely to have a very humble beginning and not to come upon the world with the beat of drums. Says Mr. Wells, "The beginnings of such things are never conspicuous. Great movements of the racial soul come at first 'like a thief in the night,' and then suddenly are discovered to be powerful and world-wide."

One observing with critical eyes the world-wide celebrations in connection with the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna, the prophet of religious federation, social liberty and inter-racial amity, might reasonably think that the benign forces of such a really humanistic revival were already at work. In spite of the fact that the outside world knows very little about India, in spite of the mistaken notions of some of the foreigners that India is peopled with dark savages who

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have yet to be civilized and taught to walk and behave like human beings, it is an undeniable fact that some of the towering intellectuals of modern Europe, together with hundreds of seekers of truth and peace hailing from almost all the big continents of the world, did rally enthusiastically round the birth centenary of a poor and barely literate Brāhman priest of the nineteenth century belonging to an out-of-the-way village of Bengal. The exact number of these individuals compared with the vast population of the earth might be infinitesimal; yet it was highly significant that in an age when the materialistic outlook on life has blinded human vision to the inner harmony and beauty of our collective existence and has thereby created an atmosphere of mutual distrust and hatred and discord throughout the world, some people at least were led by the spontaneous urge of their own hearts to rise triumphantly above the unworthy prejudices about creed and colour, and stand united to pay their homage to the lofty ideals represented by the hallowed life of Sri Ramakrishna. This tying up with a golden thread of unity diverse groups of people who had scarcely anything in common except, of course, their underlying humanity, was by itself an achievement of no mean order. And the cohesive force emanated from the life of Sri Ramakrishna symbolizing the fundamental unity and harmony of faiths and peoples. Through this astounding event one realizes the unmistakable, though humble, onset

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of the revivalist world-wide movement anticipated by Mr. Wells's imagination.

And, perhaps, through this event, one also sees how the glorious future of India and of the world visualized by Swami Vivekananda has commenced to unroll itself. The Swami declared: "Once more the wheel is turning up; once more vibrations have been set in motion in India which are destined at no distant date to reach the farthest limits of the earth. Once more the voice has spoken whose echoes are rolling on and gathering strength every day. The time was ripe for one to be born who in one body would have the brilliant intellect of Śaṅkara and the wonderfully expansive heart of Chaitanya, one who would be the embodiment of both this head and heart. Indeed, the time was ripe for one who would see in every sect the same spirit working, the same God; one who would see God in every being, one whose heart would weep for the poor, for the weak, for the outcast, for the downtrodden, for every one in this world, inside India and outside India; and at the same time whose grand and brilliant intellect would conceive of such noble thoughts as would harmonize all conflicting sects, not only in India but outside of India, and bring a marvellous harmony, the universal religion of head and heart, into existence. It was necessary that such a man should be born, and such a man was born in Sri Ramakrishna. His life was a thousandfold more than his teaching, a living commentary on the texts of the Upanishads, nay, he was the spirit of

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the Upanishads living in human form. Nowhere else in this world exists that unique perfection, that wonderful kindness for all that does not stop to justify itself, that intense sympathy for man in bondage. He lived to root out all distinction between man and woman, the rich and the poor, the literate and the illiterate, the Brāhmaṇas and the Chaṇḍālas. He was the harbinger of peace, and the separation between Hindus and Mohammedans, between Hindus and Christians, is sure to be a thing of the past. He came to bring about the synthesis of the Eastern and Western civilizations. Indeed, not for many a century past has India produced so great, so wonderful a teacher of religious synthesis." The Swami prophesied: "Before the effulgence of this new awakening, the glory of all past revivals . . . will pale like stars before the rising sun, and compared with this mighty manifestation of renewed strength, all the many past epochs of such restoration will be as child's play . . . Strong in the strength of this new spiritual renaissance, men, after reorganizing these scattered and disconnected spiritual ideals, will be able to comprehend and practise them in their own lives and also to recover from oblivion those that are lost. . . . So, at the very dawn of this momentous epoch, the reconciliation of all aspects and ideals of religious thought and worship is being proclaimed; this boundless, all-embracing idea had been lying inherent, but so long concealed, in the Religion Eternal and its scriptures, and now rediscovered, it is being declared to humanity

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in a trumpet voice. The new dispensation of the age is the source of great good to the whole world, specially to India; and the inspirer of this dispensation, Sri Bhagavan Ramakrishna, is the reformed and remodelled manifestation of all the past great epoch-makers in religion. O man, have faith in this, and lay it to heart. Of that power which at the very first impulse has roused distant echoes from all the four quarters of the globe, conceive in your mind the manifestation in its fulness; and discarding all idle misgivings, weaknesses and the jealousies characteristic of enslaved peoples, come and help in the turning of this mighty wheel of new dispensation." To those who could not accept his reading of Sri Ramakrishna on faith the Swami said, "I place this great spiritual ideal before you, and it is for you to judge him for yourselves. In the heart of your hearts is the Eternal Witness, and may He, for the good of humanity, open your hearts and make you true and steady to work for the immense change which must come, whether we exert ourselves or not. For the work of the Lord does not wait for the likes of you or me. It is a glory and privilege that we are allowed to work at all under Him." Indeed the first birth centenary of Sri Ramakrishna appears to be a promising prologue to more glorious achievements, and many a high-souled well-wisher of humanity has already come together to listen to Swami Vivekananda's gospel of hope and faith: "Once more the doors have opened. Enter ye all into the realms of Light." Over the distressed

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world are still vibrating the Swami's benedictions: "And may He who is the Lord of every sect, who is all-pervading, . . . help us, may He give strength and energy unto us: May His blessings be on you all for ever and ever!"

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